

The Error of Balaam

Numbers 23:1-24:17

March 1, 2009

Intro

We come out to a very interesting section of scripture. This story is not centered so much on the nation of Israel as it is on a man named Balaam, who was not from Israel at all.

The context of the story is that the nation of Israel is coming up to the land of Moab. They are on the east side of the Jordan River just north of the Dead Sea. They have just recently had two military victories over the Amorites and the people of Bashan who attacked Israel without provocation.

Balak, the king of Moab, looking for a way of defeating Israel without using his military, sent for Balaam who lived in Mesopotamia, a great distance away, in order that Balaam might bring a curse upon Israel. Apparently, Balaam was well known for his ability to bring both blessing and curses.

There is debate today whether Balaam was a true prophet of God. It is certainly clear from this story that he was able to receive instructions from God and he did hear God's voice, but it is also very clear that his heart was not in the right place. In fact, the scripture refers to this story as the 'error of Balaam.'

Balak sent emissaries to offer to pay Balaam to curse Israel. At first, God did not allow him to go. Balak then sent greater emissaries with offers of more money. God allowed Balaam to go, but with a firm warning to only speak as he was instructed.

There is a famous encounter with an angel of God on the way. This is the famous story of when God spoke to Balaam through his donkey. Many jokes have been made since then that if God could speak through a donkey, he could certainly speak through me.

I. Live the Life of the Righteous

- 1 The theme for this point actually comes later in the chapter, but we begin with this point because it sets God's heart before us so clearly.

A. Listen when God warns

- 2 One of the lessons we learn early on in this the story is to listen when God gives us a warning.
 - 1 God warned Balaam not to say anything," but only the word which I speak to you shall you do."
 - 2 God warned him again when the angel of the Lord met him along the way.
 - 3 God doesn't warn us unless we need it, but if he does give us a warning, we would be very wise to heed it.

4 It's actually part of God's grace that he gives us a warning, He is offering us life.

Deuteronomy 32:46-47, he said to them, "Take to your heart all the words with which I am warning you today, which you shall command your sons to observe carefully, even all the words of this law. For it is not an idle word for you; indeed it is your life. And by this word you will prolong your days in the land, which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess."

5 God gives us the Holy Spirit to give us a lack of peace when we need to be alert to something spiritually dangerous.

Illus – When the harbor master puts out the signal for an impending storm, we take the warning even if the sky seems clear.

6 As believers in Jesus Christ, we are to watch for the "signs of the times."

B. Set your mind on heavenly things

7 Clearly Balaam is very tempted by the reward of silver and gold that Balak offered him.

8 In fact, in 22:13, Balaam gives a very weak response in not agreeing to go with them to curse Israel.

9 Balaam is mentioned several times in the scriptures and the error of his ways is clearly rooted in his heart.

10 The problem is that he is earthly minded.

2 Peter 2:15, forsaking the right way, they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness;

Jude 1:11, Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain, and for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam, and perished in the rebellion of Korah.

11 Balaam kept going back to God, clearly he was looking for a loophole, and he is tempted by the money. It is the driving force of his life.

App – He knew in his mind that God did not want to curse Israel, but his heart wanted something different.

The heart will eventually make a convert of the mind. That's why it's so important that we keep the well (our hearts) full of pure water.

Luke 6:45, The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good;

and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.

Illus – there is an old saying that you no doubt have heard before. It says, “He is so heavenly minded, he is no earthly good.” I can assure you that God is not the author of that quote.

I know a lot of people who are so earthly minded that they are no heavenly good, but if you are heavenly minded you are most certainly earthly good.

C. So you can die the death of the righteous

12 In Balaam’s first discourse he makes a profound statement in verse 10. He sees that Israel is blessed of God and he says, “Let me die the death of the righteous.”

Psalm 116:15, Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His godly ones.

13 Dying the death of the righteous is the way most people would like to die. But the problem is that they don’t want to live the life of the righteous.

14 In other words, they want to live like Princess Diana, but die like Mother Teresa.

Illus- Gayle Erwin tells the story of when he taught a class on the subject of death. He had someone make a pine box and each day another student would lie in the box while the other students gave his eulogy. What an eye opening experience.

1 The scripture tells us in the book of Ecclesiastes that there is a time to be born, the time to die, a time for every purpose under heaven.

2 There is a prayer of Moses in Psalm 90 that gives us great insight...

Psalm 90:10, As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, or if due to strength, eighty years, yet their span is but labor and sorrow; for soon it is gone and we fly away.

Psalm 90:12, So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom.

1 This world has many troubles and it could be very tempting to look beyond this world, to desire to leave it behind. But Jesus said that he came that we might live life to the full.

Illus - I used to always look forward to the future.

John 16:33, “These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”

Illus – Voltaire once said, “In one day I will destroy the edifice that took the 12 apostles years to build up.” But at his death he said, “Doctor, I am abandoned by God.” The skeptic Hobbs said at his death, “I am about to take a fearful leap into the dark.”

In contrast, St. Francis was once working in his garden on his hands and knees and was asked, “if you were going to die in 10 minutes what would you do?” “I would finish this row,” he said. That is peace.

2 Timothy 4:7-8, I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.

Illus – my father’s death was very different from his life.

II. God is Faithful in His Favor

- 1 Balak was furious with Balaam for giving a blessing rather than a curse, but asked him to try again from another mountain. But this time, God had Balaam give a word directly to Balak.

A. God is faithful in His promises

- 1 I love the words of vs. 19 and 20. “Has he said, and will he not do it?”
- 2 That speaks so powerfully to the heart of God in the faithfulness of his blessing and favor upon our lives.
- 3 This is also very important for us to understand. Even in the New Testament we are given this assurance.

Hebrews 10:23, Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful;

- 4 The problem of course, is that the difficulties and trials of life make us wonder. Yet here again the scripture helps us so much.

Habakkuk 3:16-19 Hinds feet in high places

- 5 I love the assurance that Paul gives us...

2 Timothy 1:12, for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day.

B. His gifts and calling are irrevocable

- 6 In verse 20, Balaam said, “When He has blessed, I cannot revoke it.”
- 7 First, let’s understand verse 8, that he cannot denounce whom the Lord has not denounced.
- 8 We see God’s heart for Israel even in the New Testament.

Romans 11:25-29 God’s heart is still for Israel

- 1 What a declaration of His faithfulness, but also of his grace.
- 2 How much more will this also be true of us?

C. Walk as children of light

- 9 Balak is so angry at the blessings that Balaam gives that he says essentially, “If you can’t say anything bad, don’t say anything at all.”
- 10 Obviously his mother didn’t know the universal language of parents...
- 11 Balaam, most unfortunately, did give Balak some advice that greatly harmed Israel.
- 12 He told him to bring the women of Moab to Israel so that they would play the harlot with the sons of Israel.
- 13 Balaam knew that no weapon formed against them would stand, but that if they could be drawn away from God, then God would discipline, correct and even rebuke them.
- 14 We know this is the case because of what Jesus said to the church at Pergamum...

Revelation 2:14, “But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality.”

- 1 The lesson for us here is to understand is that this is exactly what our enemy would attempt to do as well. If he can draw us away from our relationship to God, then he knows that much harm can come to our lives.
- 2 The key is to walk as children of the light.

Ephesians 5:8-10, for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord;

walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.