

October 13, 2024 (Lesson 7)

BALAAM CANNOT CURSE ISRAEL

1. **Balaam Speaks Blessing, Not Cursing** (Numbers 22:1-6; 23:1-12)

2. **Israel Shall Rise Like a Lion** (Numbers 23:13-26)

3. **Blessed for Blessing Israel** (Numbers 24:1-13, 18-25)

Central Truth: We should speak life-giving words and seek to bless the people of God.

Focus: Recognize Balaam's blessings over Israel and honor the people of God.

Evangelism Emphasis: Faithfulness to God's Word is essential for effective witnessing.

Golden Text: "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?" (Numbers 23:19).

In this lesson, we encounter one of the more intriguing figures in the Old Testament: *Balaam*.

How do we understand who Balaam was? Was he a true prophet gone astray, a false prophet, a magician, or a diviner? He seems a bit of all of these. The New Testament refers to Balaam in several places, and not with any words of approval. He is presented as a greedy man, willing to sell his abilities for profit (Jude 11). Peter calls his payment the "wages of unrighteousness" (2 Peter 2:15).

Balaam was also a false teacher who led the Israelites into idolatry and sexual immorality (Rev. 2:14). This is recorded in Numbers 25, where we see the Israelites worshipping Baal and engaging in immoral acts with pagan women. Numbers 31:16 informs us this occurred "through the counsel of Balaam." He probably acted in spitefulness and revenge against Israel, after the Lord forced him to pronounce blessings instead of curses on the Hebrew people. Yet, as a result of his wicked words and deeds, God brought judgment on this false prophet and diviner, and he was eventually killed by the men of Israel (v. 8).

1. BALAAM SPEAKS BLESSING, NOT CURSING

A. Balak Summons Balaam (Numbers 22:1-6)

¹ And the children of Israel set forward, and pitched in the plains of Moab on this side Jordan by Jericho. ² And Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. ³ And Moab was sore afraid of the people, because

they were many: and Moab was distressed because of the children of Israel. ⁴ And Moab said unto the elders of Midian, Now shall this company lick up all that are round about us, as the ox licketh up the grass of the field. And Balak the son of Zippor was king of the Moabites at that time. ⁵ He sent messengers therefore unto Balaam the son of Beor to Pethor, which is by the river of the land of the children of his people, to call him, saying, Behold, there is a people come out from Egypt: behold, they cover the face of the earth, and they abide over against me: ⁶ Come now therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people; for they are too mighty for me: peradventure I shall prevail, that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land: for I wot that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed.

In Numbers 21, we read of Israel's victories over two powerful kings—Og of Bashan and Sihon of the Amorites. After these battles, Israel moved its camp to the plains of Moab, on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. They were careful to avoid the land of Moab itself, for the Lord had promised that land to Lot's descendants (Deut. 2:9).

But the king of Moab, Balak, did not know this. He only saw this huge mass of people on his border. Seeing hundreds of thousands of people and hearing of their military exploits brought fear to his heart. He also knew what happened in Egypt forty years before (Num. 22:5), and now these same people were on his doorstep. Indeed, it was prophesied that the Exodus would cause Moab to tremble (Ex. 15:13-16). Recalling the Exodus, Balak knew there were supernatural forces present in Israel. So, he decided he would enlist the aid of someone with paranormal powers. He sent for Balaam.

Balaam was a well-known prophet in that region. In 1967, in Deir Alla in Jordan, an inscription was found on the wall of a building dating to about 750 B.C. The inscription records prophecies of a "divine seer" named "Balaam, son of Beor." This fascinating archaeological find confirmed the historical nature of this Biblical account and demonstrated Balaam was widely known as a prophet during his lifetime and long afterward.

Balak offered to pay Balaam to come and curse the Israelites, confident that his curses would be effective (Num. 22:6). Balaam had enough spiritual understanding to recognize God's sovereignty and that he must not obey the king's wishes. At first, he refused to go (vv. 12-13). However, despite such clear instructions from God, he repeatedly asked the Lord about the matter.

Finally, after continued pleas from the king's messengers, he relented and went—probably driven by his greed. As Balaam traveled, “the angel of the Lord” intervened (v. 22). This was the Lord himself appearing in angelic form. The angel gave divine instruction to Balaam to go to Balak but only to speak as he was told (v. 35).

The Uniqueness of Israel

Israel is a land about which God says uniquely, prophetically, and repeatedly in the Bible, “This is Mine” (Joel 1:6; Zech. 2:5-7; Gen. 35:10-15).—Jack Hayford

B. Balaam's First Message (Numbers 23:1-12)

⁷ And he took up his parable, and said, Balak the king of Moab hath brought me from Aram, out of the mountains of the east, saying, Come, curse me Jacob, and come, defy Israel. ⁸ How shall I curse, whom God hath not cursed? or how shall I defy, whom the Lord hath not defied? ⁹ For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him: lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations. ¹⁰ Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his! ¹¹ And Balak said unto Balaam, What hast thou done unto me? I took thee to curse mine enemies, and, behold, thou hast blessed them altogether. ¹² And he answered and said, Must I not take heed to speak that which the Lord hath put in my mouth?

When Balaam arrived in Moab, the king questioned his hesitation to come. Balaam reaffirmed that he could only speak what God told him: “The word that God putteth in my mouth, that shall I speak” (22:38). King Balak then offered sacrifices to his gods, again seeking supernatural intervention against Israel (v. 40). He sent a portion of these sacrifices to Balaam, who only half-

heartedly honored the Lord. Balaam was apparently well-schooled in the arts of divination, using magic to determine the future (24:1). Thus, he would have used the livers of these sacrificed animals for *hepatoscopy*, which means “liver divination.” The wicked condition of Balaam’s heart is revealed in this action, for God condemns divination of all types in no uncertain terms (Deut. 18:10; Jer. 14:14), calling it sin (1 Sam. 15:23).

In preparation for uttering his first proclamation over Israel, Balaam made an offering of seven bulls and seven rams (Num. 23:1). *Seven* is a number signifying completion and was highly regarded by ancient Semites. This may also have been an attempt at appearing to honor Yahweh, hoping God would meet with him (v. 3). Following the sacrifices, Balaam went to a high pinnacle by himself.

God met with Balaam and gave him a message for Israel (vv. 4-5). Some may question why God would speak through such a wicked and duplicitous person. But we must remember in His sovereignty, God can speak through any vessel He chooses. If He can speak through a donkey (22:28-30) and a wicked priest (John 11:49-51), then He can speak through a diviner and false prophet.

Contrary to Balak’s desire, Balaam now issued a blessing over Israel. He acknowledged their uniqueness as God’s people (Num. 23:9) and noted that, as a nation, they were as massive as a cloud of dust (v. 10a). This echoed the promise of God to Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the sand on the shore and the stars in the sky (Gen. 22:17). Balaam then declared that he wished his fate would be like Israel’s end (Num. 23:10b). In other words, “*May I end my life as blessed of God as Israel is blessed.*” Balak was enraged at these abundant blessings pronounced over Israel (v. 11).

—*What can we learn from Numbers 23:12 about things we should and should not say?*

2. ISRAEL SHALL RISE LIKE A LION

A. Balak Tries Again (Numbers 23:13-17)

¹³ And Balak said unto him, Come, I pray thee, with me unto another place, from whence thou mayest see them: thou shalt see but the utmost part of them, and shalt not see them all: and curse me them from thence. ¹⁴ And he brought him into the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah, and built seven altars, and offered a bullock and a ram on every altar. ¹⁵ And he said unto Balak, Stand here by thy burnt offering, while I meet the Lord yonder. ¹⁶ And the Lord met Balaam, and put a word in his mouth, and said, Go again unto Balak, and say thus. ¹⁷ And when he came to him, behold, he stood by his burnt offering, and the princes of Moab with him. And Balak said unto him, What hath the Lord spoken?

Balak was frustrated, but not deterred. His name means “waster” or “devastator,” and he was determined to destroy the people of Israel. However, his determined plans would be thwarted by the hand of God.

Balak took Balaam to the top of Mount Pisgah. Ironically, from the top of Pisgah, God would reveal to Moses the Promised Land just before his death (Deut. 34:1-4). Balak chose this vantage point because it was closer to the Israelite camp, and more of the people were visible. There on Pisgah, Balak repeated his plea to Balaam to curse Israel. Balaam repeated the ritual of offering sacrifices. We again question whether this was to honor God or perhaps to provide the entrails of animals for magical purposes. Liver divination was a common practice among many ancient peoples.

Balaam did hear from God, who gave him a message for Balak. Balaam went to the king, who was standing beside his burnt offering. With him were the princes of Moab. The situation concerning Israel was so important that all of the high officials of Moab were involved. It is interesting that Balak now gave lip service to God. He “eagerly” asked, “What did the Lord say?” (Num. 23:17 NLT).

—In what ways were Balak’s actions similar to ways Satan comes against Christians?

B. Balaam’s Second Message (Numbers 23:18-26)

¹⁸ And he took up his parable, and said, Rise up, Balak, and hear; hearken unto me, thou son of Zippor: ¹⁹ God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good? ²⁰ Behold, I have received commandment to bless: and he hath blessed; and I cannot reverse it. ²¹ He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel: the Lord his God is with him, and the shout of a king is among them. ²² God brought them out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn. ²³ Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, neither is there any divination against Israel: according to this time it shall be said of Jacob and of Israel, What hath God wrought! ²⁴ Behold, the people shall rise up as a great lion, and lift up himself as a young lion: he shall not lie down until he eat of the prey, and drink the blood of the slain.

Balaam issued a prophecy directly from God. This message was directed specifically to the king of Moab. Balaam begins by asserting the truthfulness of God—that the Lord cannot lie, nor does He change His mind. In essence, the exalted nature of the person of God was affirmed. God is not fickle nor subject to change, as are the gods of the pagans. In Isaiah 46:5, God asked, “To whom will you liken Me?” (NKJV), and contrasted His nature with that of false gods (vv. 6-10). The gods of the nations are weak, capricious, and deceptive—while the real God is good, true, and dependable. Balaam then began a series of declarations regarding the favor of God resting on Israel.

First, Balaam declared God “sees no trouble for Israel” because He is with them (Num. 23:21a HCSB). These are the people of God, and His name rests upon them (6:27). The Lord is Israel’s King, and He shouts with a great cry of victory over them (23:21b).

Second, the Lord reminded Balak that God himself brought Israel out of Egypt. This must have caused the king to tremble anew with fear. He would have heard of the miraculous deliverance that occurred during the Exodus. Balaam then asserted the great strength of the Hebrew nation. They are like a wild ox in their might (v. 22).

Balaam’s third statement denounced both the king and the prophet. No work of sorcery or divination was effective against these people (v. 23). Balak had summoned Balaam because of his

supposed supernatural abilities, but these were useless against the people God had blessed. This reminds us of times God contrasted His power with that of sorcerers, astrologers, and diviners (Mic. 3:6-7; Dan. 2:27-28). God does reveal the unknown and the secret, and the Bible accurately predicts the future. However, all of this glorifies God. Divination is based on the demonic and is full of deception. The Lord condemns false prophets who claim divine direction but who speak lies to deceive people (Ezek. 13:3-9).

Finally, Balaam compared Israel to a lion (Num. 23:24). Proverbs 30:30 calls lions “strongest among beasts,” while Revelation 5:5 calls Jesus “the Lion of the tribe of Judah.” Balaam’s usage of a lion as an image of Israel probably referred to two things: (1) the might and strength of the people of God, and (2) the royal nature of this people (see Ex. 19:5-6).

In frustration, Balak told the prophet to quit either blessing or cursing the people (Num. 23:25). Perhaps this was a way of Balak saying to Balaam, “Why don’t you just shut up!” Balaam replied, “Did I not tell you, saying, ‘All that the Lord speaks, that I must do?’” (v. 26 NKJV).

Words of Affirmation

Mark Twain said, “I can live for two months on a good compliment.” Think about what it feels like when someone speaks words of encouragement to you. It buoys your spirit and gladdens your heart. You feel like you can face the challenges of life when someone has affirmed you in some way. Throughout the Scriptures, if you are a child of God, you can find the most powerful words of affirmation coming from the Lord himself. Let His words build you up.

3. BLESSED FOR BLESSING ISRAEL

A. God’s Spirit Comes on Balaam (Numbers 24:1-4)

¹ And when Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, he went not, as at other times, to seek for enchantments, but he set his face toward the wilderness. ² And Balaam lifted up his eyes, and he saw Israel abiding in his tents according to their tribes; and the spirit of God came upon him. ³ And he took up his parable, and said, Balaam the son of Beor hath said,

and the man whose eyes are open hath said: ⁴ He hath said, which heard the words of God, which saw the vision of the Almighty, falling into a trance, but having his eyes open.

Balak now takes Balaam to a third peak, Mount Peor (Num. 23:27-28). Here the prophet had a view of the entire Israelite encampment. As he gazed downward, he would have noticed the camp's middle, devoid of tents except for the tabernacle. Above the tabernacle, he would have seen a column of cloud—the manifestation of God's glory. Even Balaam must have been awestruck.

Now he “saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel” (24:1). Perhaps his eyes were opened by seeing the Lord's glory hovering over the Israelite camp. Finally, he comprehended the Lord's special love for Israel. With this spiritual insight, he chose to not use sorcery in seeking a word from God, as he had previously. He laid aside his magic and chose to seek God alone.

In response, the Lord's Spirit came upon him. He fell into a trance and received revelation from God. It may seem odd that the Spirit would rest on a man like Balaam. Yet, God is powerful enough that He can work through whomever He chooses. Consider other Biblical examples. Even in his rebellion, the Spirit of the Lord came on King Saul, and he prophesied (1 Sam. 19:23-24). Isaiah called the pagan king Cyrus His “anointed” (Isa. 45:1). God can use anyone for His glory.

A Potent Prayer

Give to us clear vision that we may know where to stand and what to stand for—because unless we stand for something, we shall fall for anything.—Peter Marshall

B. Blessing and Cursing (Numbers 24:5-13, 18-25)

⁵ How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel! ⁶ As the valleys are they spread forth, as gardens by the river's side, as the trees of lign aloes which the Lord hath planted, and as cedar trees beside the waters. ⁷ He shall pour the water out of his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters, and his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted. ⁸ God brought him forth out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn: he shall eat up the nations

his enemies, and shall break their bones, and pierce them through with his arrows.⁹ He couched, he lay down as a lion, and as a great lion: who shall stir him up? Blessed is he that blesseth thee, and cursed is he that curseth thee.

¹² And Balaam said unto Balak, Spake I not also to thy messengers which thou sentest unto me, saying,¹³ If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the commandment of the Lord, to do either good or bad of mine own mind; but what the Lord saith, that will I speak?

Under divine influence, Balaam now uttered a series of pronouncements about the favor of God on Israel. Let's take a few moments and examine these in order. After gazing on Israel's camp (v. 2), Balaam described their prosperity, saying they are a prosperous garden, a well-watered valley overflowing with abundance (vv. 5-7). God's people being compared to a fruitful tree was common in the Old Testament (Ps. 1:3; Isa. 61:3; Jer. 17:8).

Numbers 24:8-9 offers two pictures of Israel's favored position. First, Balaam recalled the Exodus, when God's supernatural work marked them perpetually. Second, Balaam compared them with two strong animals—a "wild ox" (NKJV) and a lion. The Hebrews commonly used the image of an ox to indicate might and power. Being like a lion meant the people of God were strong and noble like the king of beasts.

Verse 9 concludes by declaring those who bless Israel will be blessed, and those who curse Israel will be cursed. This was stated in defiance of Balak's demand, and echoed God's blessing on Abraham (Gen. 12:2-3). Some wrongly interpret God's promise in Genesis 12 as only applying to Abraham personally. This is usually done by those who assert the church has replaced Israel as God's chosen people. While the church is the heir to the promises of God through Abraham (Gal. 3:7-9), this does not mean the church has replaced Israel. Israel still has a special role in God's economy. He has not cast them away (Rom. 11:2).

Balak was furious at Balaam for blessing Israel (Num. 24:10). Balaam defended himself by again reminding the king he could only speak as the Lord directed (v. 13). He also stated he was only revealing what he saw in a vision from God (v. 16).

Balaam then launched into his final set of blessings (vv. 17-24). The majority of this passage is a prophetic account of what would happen to the various nations of the region. Some would be conquered. Others would rise and then fall. The fortunes of the various peoples would come and go. Yet, through it all, “Israel will be triumphant” (v. 18 HCSB).

After this final prophetic blessing for Israel, Balaam and the king rose and went their separate ways. The king left in frustration and disappointment. Balaam left God’s presence and returned to his wickedness. After this, we read of Israel’s idolatry and sexual immorality with the women of Moab (Num. 25:1-3), with Balaam being the instigator of this iniquity (31:16). To the end, Balaam was wicked and soon suffered God’s judgment (v. 8).

—*What is more valuable than “silver and gold” (24:13), and why?*

SPEAK LIFE-GIVING WORDS

The story of Balaam has many valuable lessons for us. Perhaps most prominently is that God’s will cannot be thwarted. And what is God’s will? It is to bless and not to curse (see Jer. 29:11). God desires good for His people, and so should we. It is easy to fall into the sins of criticism, judgmentalism, fault-finding, and so on. This is why James warned us so strongly about the power of the tongue (James 3:2-13). Let us learn a lesson from the example of Balaam and choose to be people of blessing, speaking positive input into the lives of others.

Daily Devotions

- M. Melchizedek Honors Abram (Genesis 14:18-20)
- T. David Refrains From Harming Saul (1 Samuel 24:1-12)

- W. Leaders Cooperate With Nehemiah (Nehemiah 2:11-18)
- T. John Agrees to Baptize Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17)
- F. Imitate Godly Leaders (1 Corinthians 4:14-16)
- S. Respect Church Leaders (Hebrews 13:15-18)