

The Seer Who Sees

BALAAM • PART 3 • NUMBERS 23:1-26

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****COVID-19 SPLIT SERVICE****

It is good to be with you this morning! I hope all of us have the elements for the Lord's Supper (either from home or from the table in the back room), as John/Aaron will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper after our study this morning. Then, after the Lord's Supper, Michael/Caleb will be leading us in "Standing on the Promises" (#598). We've had some good news today concerning Tyler Cage at UW Hospital. He seems to be getting stronger. We also have a special prayer request from Tom Bovis, the preacher down in Janesville. His wife will be going in for heart valve replacement surgery at St. Mary's Hospital this Thursday. This is her second major heart surgery in nine years, so he has asked us to be praying for her this week.

As our tradition has been since the pandemic began, we want to start today by giving at least a brief summary of God's plan for saving us. We know that we have sinned, those sins have separated us from God, and yet, because he loves us so much, God sent his only Son to save us. He lived a perfect life and offered himself up on the cross as a substitute; but, he was raised up from the dead on the first day of the week. In response, we hear this good news, we believe it, we have a change of heart and turn away from sin, we confess our faith in Jesus as the Son of God, and then we allow ourselves to be buried with him in the act of baptism, a burial in water for the forgiveness of sins. We are born into God's family and the Christian life begins.

And once again, we have some good news to share – this time, from Jack Jaco, a gospel preacher in the Philippines. I don't have any names, but these are some baptisms from the past few weeks over in the Philippines. As usual, we are sharing this by way of encouragement: What they have done, you can do today. If you have any questions, if you would like to study together, please get in touch.

Before we get to our study, I'd like to pass along a few updates from Silas Morris concerning the website. We hope to look at the YouTube statistics next week, but today we take just a quick look at the pages people are noticing. Not surprisingly, most people look at the home page – this is an entry point, where we have some announcements, and times of services, and our address, and the COVID updates. Out of all of our pages on the website, this one seems to have the most views, at nearly 19% of all of our traffic. But then, we have the "sermons" pages, and when we add up the views on the various sermon pages, we come to somewhere around 25%, which is more than the home page. Third in line here would be the Bible correspondence course page,

where people enroll in the course. And then we have the giving page at just over 1% of our traffic, and then it trails off from there.

As to how people get to our site, just over 53% actually type in the address, fourlakescoc.org. Then we have a series of search engines (Google, Yahoo, Bing, Baidu, and DuckDuckGo down there at the bottom). Baidu is apparently a Chinese search engine. And then we have referrals from various sources, starting with people who find our site through Facebook. And I find it interesting that we are somehow getting some traffic through the website of the Crystal Lake congregation down in Illinois. These are just the top ten, and then it trails off from there. We share these things as a brief reminder of what is going on behind the scenes and as a reminder that thousands of people are finding us online and benefiting from what we are doing here in Madison. This also reminds us that we can share the website – on a business card, by email, and even on social media.

This morning, we return to a series of lessons we started two weeks ago, at the request of one of our Christian sisters, who was asking for more information on Balaam in the book of Numbers. Balaam is a strange character! One source I read this week said that his series on Balaam nearly broke his brain as a preacher, and I can empathize with that. Balaam is a difficult character to understand. We have more than three chapters of the Bible dedicated to this pagan seer, described in the New Testament as a false prophet, and yet in the book of Numbers he actually seems to teach the truth, although with evil motives. Again, he is a strange character. From the preacher's point of view, in terms of sermon study and preparation, we have tons of resources concerning Balaam and the donkey, but almost nothing on anything else in this man's life.

Two weeks ago, then, we set the stage with the Israelites coming out of 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, and right at the very end of that they camp out right across the Jordan River from Jericho, but with a group of 2-3 million people, they cause a bit of a panic among the locals. King Balak of Moab, then, tries to hire the prophet Balaam from way up north. Balaam is not a prophet in the traditional sense of that word, but he's more like a fortune-teller, a witch doctor, a sorcerer of some kind, and he is well known for cursing people.

We looked at Balaam as a prophet for sale or rent. God tells him not to curse the people of Israel, but as a for-profit prophet, Balaam really wants the payout, so he presses forward. And in terms of practical application of that passage, we learned that as we make decisions in our own lives, we need to be aware that money is a powerful (and sometimes dangerous) motivator, we learned that there are some things we do NOT need to pray about (when God reveals something in his word we do not need to be going back to him again and again looking for a different answer), and we also learned ultimately that God does not approve of everything he allows. If we insist on ignoring his word, sometimes he lets us learn some lessons the hard way.

Then, last week, we looked at the talking donkey passage. As Balaam travels to Moab, hoping to get paid, his donkey sees an angel blocking the way with his sword drawn. The donkey veers off into a field, crushes Balaam's foot against a wall, and finally just sits down, saving his life, before Balaam's eyes are opened. In addition to what we learned from Balaam last week, we also learned a lesson from the donkey, that she was faithful (to God and to her owner), even when she was not appreciated. We ended last week with Balaam continuing on the way, but under strict orders from the angel to only prophesy what God allows him to prophesy. And so, perhaps the greater miracle we are about to see is not that God can speak through a donkey, but that he can speak through Balaam, a pagan seer, and that is what we are going to look at this morning (and next week as well). When we think of prophets, we might think of great men like Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Daniel, and Amos, and Malachi, and Moses, and even Jesus. They spoke words of truth. But today, we will find that Balaam, a false prophet, also speaks words of truth. However, underneath all of this (based on what we learn later in the New

Testament), Balaam is still really hoping to get paid, and so he really wants to curse Israel, as he has been hired to do.

I don't know how many of us have had to hire people, but as we very quickly move through these next two chapters (today and next Sunday), I want us to try to imagine the frustration of King Balak, who has hired Balaam for one thing; but, it is this one thing Balaam seems completely incapable of doing. For King Balak (as an employer) this is a nightmare scenario. As he pays Balaam to do one thing, Balaam's eyes continue to be opened as he does the exact opposite, and we will see this in a series of four oracles, or poems, or messages, or **"discourses,"** as they are described in the NASB. So, today, I want us to start an overview of these two chapters, giving us the big picture here, helping us learn from Balaam as his eyes are opened once again, and helping us understand why God would devote three entire chapters of the Bible to a false prophet. We will look at the first two oracles today, and the next two oracles next week.

- I. In the first oracle, we find that **GOD'S WORD PREVAILS**: In fact, despite Balak hiring Balaam to pronounce a curse on the Israelites, **GOD'S BLESSING ON HIS PEOPLE IS UNAVOIDABLE**.

Let's look at Numbers 23:1-12,

¹ Then Balaam said to Balak, "Build seven altars for me here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me here." ² Balak did just as Balaam had spoken, and Balak and Balaam offered up a bull and a ram on each altar. ³ Then Balaam said to Balak, "Stand beside your burnt offering, and I will go; perhaps the LORD will come to meet me, and whatever He shows me I will tell you." So he went to a bare hill. ⁴ Now God met Balaam, and he said to Him, "I have set up the seven altars, and I have offered up a bull and a ram on each altar." ⁵ Then the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth and said, "Return to Balak, and you shall speak thus." ⁶ So he returned to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering, he and all the leaders of Moab. ⁷ He took up his discourse and said,

***"From Aram Balak has brought me,
Moab's king from the mountains of the East,
'Come curse Jacob for me,
And come, denounce Israel!"***

***⁸ "How shall I curse whom God has not cursed?
And how can I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced?"***

***⁹ "As I see him from the top of the rocks,
And I look at him from the hills;
Behold, a people who dwells apart,
And will not be reckoned among the nations.***

***¹⁰ "Who can count the dust of Jacob,
Or number the fourth part of Israel?
Let me die the death of the upright,
And let my end be like his!"***

¹¹ Then Balak said to Balaam, "What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, but behold, you have actually blessed them!" ¹² He replied, "Must I not be careful to speak what the LORD puts in my mouth?"

A few things we need to notice here: Starting with the fact that Balaam is using sorcery. It might not be obvious at first, but when we get to Numbers 24:1 (leading up to the third oracle), the text says, ***“When Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he did not go as at other times to seek omens but he set his face toward the wilderness.”*** So, these ***“other times”*** (the first two oracles), Balaam was using his traditional sorcery, we might say. This exact thing is explicitly condemned in Leviticus 19:26. But this is what Balaam is doing here. So, we have Balaam order Balak to build seven altars, with seven bulls and seven rams. And then we have Balaam (the prophet) commanding Balak (the king) to ***“stand beside your burnt offering.”*** This was so the gods would know who is sending this sacrifice. It was a message to the pagan gods, ***“When you do what we are asking, this is the person who is asking. This is the one who is paying for this prophecy.”*** Of course, when Balaam goes up to the bare hill to look for his answer, God meets Balaam there, and instead of the curse that Balak is hoping for, God gives Balaam a different message, a message of blessing. And I want us to notice (in verse 5) that the Lord ***“put a word in Balaam’s mouth.”*** So, God is dictating at this point. God is doing to Balaam what he did for the donkey. And I say this because of a shift that we will see a little bit later. But here, instead of Balaam putting a word in some pagan god’s mouth, God is putting a word in his mouth.

I should also point out with this first one, that the messages get progressively more severe as we go along. They get worse and worse for Balak. So, we start rather mild with the first one here. In the first oracle, God is basically asking questions. He’s getting Balak to think about what he’s doing. So, he has Balaam basically asking: You’ve brought me here to curse Israel, but ***“how can I curse whom God has not cursed?”*** You’ve brought me here (literally) to ***“rage”*** against Israel, but how can I do that when these people are clearly blessed by God? In verse 9, Balaam sees the Israelites as being different from all other nations. Remember: This is what God first promised to Abraham and repeated to Moses (in Exodus 19:5-6), ***“Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”*** Balaam is starting to see this. By the way, it’s interesting that the Israelites seem to get in trouble whenever they FORGET this! They are different, but they get in trouble when they start trying to be like the world around them (and this is a good lesson for us to learn). Instead of celebrating their unique relationship with God, they (and we) sometimes forget. But Balaam is starting to understand something here! His eyes are starting to open, just as his eyes were opened to the angel standing in the path. He is a seer who is starting to see that God’s people are special. And finally (in verse 10), Balaam just barely starts to understand the ***“dust of Jacob”*** (a reference to the prophecy first made to Abraham), when God said to Abraham in Genesis 13:16, ***“I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered.”*** Balaam is starting to see this, and he almost seems to wish that he could be a part of this group, ***“Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his.”*** In other words, if I can paraphrase, Balaam is saying, ***“I’m liking what I’m seeing here! These people are truly righteous. God is obviously with them. And when I die, I want to die like they do, with something to look forward to in the life after this one.”*** So, the door just barely cracks open a bit. Of course, Balaam doesn’t realize that by the end of Numbers, these people will kill him in battle (not exactly what he is hoping for here)! Nevertheless, Balaam sees something appealing in being an Israelite.

And then, of course, at the end of this first oracle, King Balak is irate as he says, ***“What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, but behold, you have actually blessed them!”*** Balak is not getting what he is paying for. He’s made a terrible mistake in the hiring process! He’s built all of these altars and made all of these expensive sacrifices, and this man he has hired is doing the exact opposite of what he is paying him to do. And Balaam replies by asking, ***“Must I not be careful to speak what the LORD puts in my mouth?”*** We might think that Balak would give up at this point, that he would learn that prophecy cannot be purchased and send Balaam home, and yet he does not learn his lesson the easy way, and this leads us to the second oracle...

- II. ...because in verse 13, King Balak tries again, and this time the message from God is a bit stronger than the last one, because we find here a reminder that **GOD DOES NOT CHANGE, GOD DOES NOT LIE, GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES**, and so, the **ISRAELITES' VICTORY IS INEVITABLE**.

This second oracle is found in verses 13-26. Let's notice what happens next, and let's see whether Balak gets what he's paying for this time – Numbers 23:13-26,

¹³ Then Balak said to him, "Please come with me to another place from where you may see them, although you will only see the extreme end of them and will not see all of them; and curse them for me from there."¹⁴ So he took him to the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah, and built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each altar.¹⁵ And he said to Balak, "Stand here beside your burnt offering while I myself meet the LORD over there."¹⁶ Then the LORD met Balaam and put a word in his mouth and said, "Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak."¹⁷ He came to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering, and the leaders of Moab with him. And Balak said to him, "What has the LORD spoken?"¹⁸ Then he took up his discourse and said,

***"Arise, O Balak, and hear;
Give ear to me, O son of Zippor!
¹⁹ "God is not a man, that He should lie,
Nor a son of man, that He should repent;
Has He said, and will He not do it?
Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?
²⁰ "Behold, I have received a command to bless;
When He has blessed, then I cannot revoke it.
²¹ "He has not observed misfortune in Jacob;
Nor has He seen trouble in Israel;
The LORD his God is with him,
And the shout of a king is among them.
²² "God brings them out of Egypt,
He is for them like the horns of the wild ox.
²³ "For there is no omen against Jacob,
Nor is there any divination against Israel;
At the proper time it shall be said to Jacob
And to Israel, what God has done!
²⁴ "Behold, a people rises like a lioness,
And as a lion it lifts itself;
It will not lie down until it devours the prey,
And drinks the blood of the slain."***

²⁵ Then Balak said to Balaam, "Do not curse them at all nor bless them at all!"²⁶ But Balaam replied to Balak, "Did I not tell you, 'Whatever the LORD speaks, that I must do'?"

Let's notice up at the beginning how Balak changes places. He changes the location of the sacrifices. Remember: At this point, Balaam is still using sorcery to try to get God to say what he wants him to say so that he can get paid. Balak, then, as a part of this, thinks they might get a more favorable answer from God if they move. And

what I notice about this new location is that instead of seeing all of Israel, now from this new location he can only see **“the extreme end of them”** so he **“will not see all of them.”** The view is obscured from this vantage point. And this seems to be the purpose of this new overlook. We aren’t told why, but perhaps King Balak is thinking that Balaam simply got a bit overwhelmed with the size the group gathered below. After all, as we said last week, we are talking about a group of 2-3 million people. Maybe Balaam is getting distracted by the numbers we’re up against down there. King Balak is still not hearing that part about God actually speaking to Balaam. He still thinks this is a problem with the method. So, he has Balaam try a new spot. And maybe if we can just curse a few of the Israelites, then maybe the curse can take hold and spread, almost like an infection. Maybe we can take this in small bite-size sections. Who knows, but Balak gives the command, **“curse them for me from there.”**

Once again, Balaam has Balak stand beside the burnt offering, and once again, the Lord meets Balaam and puts a word in his mouth, and the Lord gives him this second message to pass along to the king. I find it interesting that in verse 17, when Balaam returns, Balak asks, **“What has the Lord spoken?”** He doesn’t care what the Lord has spoken! He is paying for a curse, and he wants a return on his investment. Unfortunately for him, the message Balaam brings back is: God does not change (verse 19)! **“God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent.”** In other words, no matter how many times you ask, no matter what kind of view you have of the people down below, no matter how many altars you build or how many bulls and rams you sacrifice, God’s answer on this will always be the same. Since God has spoken on this, he will do it.

Plus, as God says in verse 21, Israel hasn’t done anything worthy of getting cursed in the way that Balak wants to see happen, **“He has not observed misfortune in Jacob; nor has he seen trouble in Israel.”** Of course, Israel has had some trouble here and there – the ten spies blew it, the people have whined and complained for the past forty years, but God has made some promises. So far, the Israelites have not done anything worthy of the destruction Balak wants to see happen.

And now, because Balak has come back again, it seems that God adds a bit here. This isn’t just about a **“blessing”** as it was in the first oracle, but now we have what looks like some kind of military victory, **“the shout of a king is among them”** (in verse 21). God brings them out of Egypt (in verse 22). The first few times I read this, I thought their strength is compared to the strength of a wild ox, but that’s not it, is it? No, God is for them **“like the horns of the wild ox.”** It’s God who is strong, not Israel. They succeed, not because they are strong, but because God is strong; they succeed, not because they are some superpower, but because God is a super power. God is their invincible King. And for this reason (in verse 23), curses don’t work on these people. They are uncurseable. The spell-check on my computer doesn’t think “uncurseable” is a word, but it is now! Balak is insisting on a curse, but Balaam is starting to see that God’s people are uncurseable. The point is: Balak is asking Balaam to do the impossible. It’s not that Balaam is slacking off on the job, it’s that curses do not work on the Israelites. And so, at the end, Israel is described as a lion hunting its prey. They are at the top of the food chain. For the past 400+ years, God has been bringing them to this place for the purpose of bringing them into the Promised Land, and nothing will change that (certainly not a few dead bulls offered on a pagan altar).

In verse 25, Balak hears this message, and his response is, “Do not curse them at all nor bless them at all!” In other words, “Stop talking! Please do not make this any worse!” And if I could paraphrase, Balaam replies, “I told you so!” **“Did I not tell you, ‘Whatever the Lord speaks, that I must do’?”**

Conclusion:

Hopefully we can come back to the next two oracles next week. But for now we've become at least a bit more familiar with this seer who seems to be gaining the ability to see. And this morning, it seems that he's starting to understand that God keeps his promises. And this is something we understand. This is something we get out of this chapter: When God makes a promise, when God makes a covenant with his people, he keeps it. And the covenant we live under is even better than the old one. The New Covenant was sealed or ratified with the blood of Jesus, and it was proven to be true through the resurrection.

We actually have a blessing near the end of Hebrews (in Hebrews 13:20-21), where the author says, ***"Now may the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen"*** (Hebrews 13:20-21). This is why Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:20, ***"For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory."*** So, we have the reminder today from Balaam that God keeps his promises. No matter what the world tries to do to us, no matter what might be going on behind the scenes, all of God's promises are ***"Yes"*** in Jesus. And that's where we leave it for today. Hopefully next week we can look at the next two oracles – as Balak still hasn't learned his lesson about this man he's hired, and as Balaam's eyes open even more.

Thank you so much for being with us today. Before [John/Aaron] leads us in the prayers for the Supper, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

Thank you for loving us, and thank you for the New Covenant, sealed with the blood of your Son – his blood that was poured out for our forgiveness. Thank you for keeping your word and for being a God who can always be trusted. We are thankful for your message of love and forgiveness, revealed to us in scripture. You are the God of peace who raised the Great Shepherd from the dead. We pray that we would recommit this morning to always doing your will. We pray that we would constantly work on changing our lives to fit the way you want us to live, instead of us trying to manipulate you to fit the way we are living (as Balak tried to do through Balaam).

As a congregation of your people, we are asking with one voice that you bring comfort to Tyler and to everybody in his family. Be with our seniors. Bless those who put their lives on the line to serve others. We'd also like to ask that you bless Louise Bovis as she is anticipating surgery this coming Thursday.

Thank you, Father, for hearing our prayer. We come to you through Jesus our Savior. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: foullakeschurch@gmail.com