

The Seer Who Sees

BALAAM • PART 4 • NUMBERS 23:27 - 24:25

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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 will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper after our study this morning. Then, after the Lord's Supper, Clayton/Noah will be leading us in "The Battle Belongs to the Lord" (#977).

As our tradition has been since the pandemic began, we'd like to start today by summarizing God's plan of salvation. We've sinned, but God made a way for sin to be forgiven. He sent his only Son to die for us, he was buried, but he was raised up on the third day. In response, we hear this, we believe it, we turn away from sin, we confess Jesus as being the Son of God, and we allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins, at which point God adds us to his kingdom, the church. And once again, we have some good news to share – this time, from Jake Sutton, who preaches for the Piedmont Road congregation in Marietta, Georgia. And the picture on the wall up here is probably the best thing I've seen all week. Last Sunday, Jake posted online and said, "Today a husband baptized his wife. God bless Tristen and Rose Harstvedt as they both walk this life of Christ together." How amazing! We are thankful that Tristen and Rose are now walking together in the Christian faith. And, as usual, we are sharing this by way of encouragement: What Rose has 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 more updates from Silas Morris concerning what is happening online. Last week we looked at the website. Today we're sharing an update concerning what is happening on YouTube. Some of you remember how we started livestreaming on Facebook with a phone on a clip several years ago. That very quickly evolved to adding internet here at the building, and then we moved the PA system from up here to the back room, where we added some outlets, and a computer, and an actual camera. It was a huge leap for us, and perhaps providentially, we were just getting everything squared away and getting comfortable with it just a few months before COVID hit. And this allowed us to be bit more prepared than many. So, with this in mind, Silas Morris tells us that we've had more than 5,000 views on YouTube since the beginning of 2020, and to put this in perspective with the hours involved here, this is the equivalent of watching the extended edition Lord of the Rings trilogy 126 times!

As to the devices people use to watch our livestream every week, phones come in first with just over 53% of the total, but the watch time is only 13 minutes. As the chart explains, the number of views on televisions is lower, but the average duration is longer, and I believe Silas explained that a good number of people are most likely opening the livestream on their phone and then casting it to their TV. So, the watch time on the phone would be just a few seconds before it transfers to the television. Others join in on a computer, a tablet, and sometimes on a game console. By the way, we send out the links for Sunday worship and our Wednesday class, both on Facebook (in the private group), and to two email lists – to our members who have an email address in the church directory, and to a separate list for anybody else who is interested. If you are not getting these links and would like to, please let me know, and we would be glad to add you in some way. I would point out that most of this is fairly private. I think the YouTube videos remain “unpublished,” primarily because some of what we talk about is a bit personal (with prayer requests and so on). We have only rarely shared the livestream on our public Facebook page as it is happening. So, these numbers are mainly “us.” Thanks to those of you helping to make this happen. Next week I hope we can look at some of the stats from those who join us on the phone.

This morning, we return to a series of lessons we started three 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! 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. 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, especially with King Balak of Moab, who tries to hire Balaam to curse the Israelites. He is a prophet for sale or rent. ****PPT**** We looked at some practical lessons from Balaam, including the danger of loving money and the danger of trying to manipulate God to get what we want, and the danger is: Sometimes God lets us have our own way!

As Balaam continued stubbornly on his way despite being opposed by God, we then had something of a showdown between a stubborn donkey and a stubborn prophet! Balaam was blind to the truth until his donkey speaks up and clarifies a few things. And we learned from the donkey herself, that she was faithful to both God and Balaam, in terms of saving his life.

Then, last week, we moved along and started looking at a series of four oracles delivered by Balaam to King Balak. Balak has hired Balaam to curse Israel, and Balaam, still wanting to get paid, is really looking for a loophole. But for now, whenever he opens his mouth, instead of a curse, a blessing pops out! Last week, then, we looked at the first two of the four messages, and we started learning that as Balak insists on a curse, and as Balaam keeps trying for that curse, the messages get progressively more severe.

Before we look at the last two oracles today, I need to share something that my dad taught me over lunch last week. He dug way back in his memory banks and picked up on a tiny phrase from Balaam’s second oracle, a phrase found in Numbers 23:23. In Numbers 23:23 (in the KJV) Balaam says,

***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!***

In the NASB, he refers to ***“what God has done,”*** but in the KJV the text has Balaam exclaiming, ***“What hath God wrought!”*** an exclamation of amazement. What dad remembered goes back to 1844. I don’t think dad was there when it happened in 1844, but on May 24, 1844, witnessed by congress, Samuel Morse set up and sent the first telegram in US history, from the Supreme Court chambers in Washington, DC, to Alfred Vail at a railroad station in Baltimore, Maryland. The text of that first telegraph was suggested to Morse by Annie Ellworth, the daughter of the commissioner of patents. The message he sent was this quote from Numbers 23:23, ***“What hath God wrought!”*** The telegraph, of course, quickly caught on, aiding in the rapid expansion of the United States to the west, and eventually leading to further inventions, including the telephone and ultimately the internet (the idea of sending information over wires). Today, then, we remember Morse as the inventor of both the telegraph itself and of what we know today as “Morse Code,” a set of symbols (dots and dashes), representing letters and numbers. So, thanks to dad for remembering the historical significance of this phrase from Numbers 23 and the first telegram in US history. And thanks to Balaam for playing a role in this.

Today, let’s get back to the series of oracles. Up to this point, we’ve had two. The first message reminds King Balak that God’s word prevails: Blessing is unavoidable. When God gives a blessing, he keeps his promises. Then, when he presses it further, the second message reminds King Balak that God does not change: Therefore, victory is inevitable. So, it progresses from just BLESSING the Israelites, to giving them some kind of military VICTORY.

I. **As we return to our text, let’s pick up with Numbers 23:27, where we find that GOD HAS SPOKEN: HE BLESSES THE BLESSERS AND CURSES THE CURSERS.**

Let’s look at Balaam’s third oracle, Numbers 23:27 - 24:14,

27 Then Balak said to Balaam, “Please come, I will take you to another place; perhaps it will be agreeable with God that you curse them for me from there.” 28 So Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor which overlooks the wasteland. 29 Balaam said to Balak, “Build seven altars for me here and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me here.” 30 Balak did just as Balaam had said, and offered up a bull and a ram on each altar. 1 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. 2 And Balaam lifted up his eyes and saw Israel camping tribe by tribe; and the Spirit of God came upon him. 3 He took up his discourse and said,

***“The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor,
And the oracle of the man whose eye is opened;***

***4 The oracle of him who hears the words of God,
Who sees the vision of the Almighty,
Falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered,***

***5 How fair are your tents, O Jacob,
Your dwellings, O Israel!***

***6 “Like valleys that stretch out,
Like gardens beside the river,
Like aloes planted by the LORD,
Like cedars beside the waters.***

***7 “Water will flow from his buckets,
And his seed will be by many waters,
And his king shall be higher than Agag,***

And his kingdom shall be exalted.

***⁸ “God brings him out of Egypt,
He is for him like the horns of the wild ox.
He will devour the nations who are his adversaries,
And will crush their bones in pieces,
And shatter them with his arrows.
⁹ “He couches, he lies down as a lion,
And as a lion, who dares rouse him?
Blessed is everyone who blesses you,
And cursed is everyone who curses you.”***

¹⁰ Then Balak’s anger burned against Balaam, and he struck his hands together; and Balak said to Balaam, “I called you to curse my enemies, but behold, you have persisted in blessing them these three times! ¹¹ Therefore, flee to your place now. I said I would honor you greatly, but behold, the LORD has held you back from honor.” ¹² Balaam said to Balak, “Did I not tell your messengers whom you had sent to me, saying, ¹³ ‘Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything contrary to the command of the LORD, either good or bad, of my own accord. What the LORD speaks, that I will speak’? ¹⁴ And now, behold, I am going to my people; come, and I will advise you what this people will do to your people in the days to come.”

Something changes with this third message. Once again, King Balak takes Balaam to a new location. He still thinks there’s some problem with the place, so he goes somewhere else, ***“perhaps it will be agreeable with God that you curse them for me from there.”*** And once again, Balaam has Balak build seven altars, to sacrifice seven bulls and seven rams, just as with the first two times. But as we cross over into Chapter 24, something changes. When Balaam sees that it pleases the Lord to bless Israel (his eyes are starting to open here), when he sees this, when he realizes that God likes it when people bless Israel, he decides that he’s not going to rely on his sorcery this time, and this time he simply looks out toward the wilderness. And when he sees Israel camped out according to their tribes, the Bible says here that ***“the Spirit of God came upon him.”*** This is different. In those first two oracles, the Bible says that God ***“put the words in Balaam’s mouth.”*** In other words, in the first two oracles, God treats Balaam pretty much like his donkey. God is dictating. Balaam wants to give a curse so he can get paid, but God presses the “override” button, and replaces Balaam’s words with his own words. But here, something happens with Balaam. His eyes are opened, he sees a bit more of what’s going on here, and God’s Spirit comes upon him.

It’s a bit strange for us to think about God’s spirit coming upon an outsider (especially a pagan seer). But we need to realize that God’s Spirit coming upon and speaking through someone does not necessarily mean that the person is saved or in a right relationship with God. We think of King Saul. In that period of time after Saul had sinned in the matter with the Amalekites, we find in 1 Samuel 19:23 that ***“the Spirit of God came upon him also, so that he went along prophesying continually.”*** And this was a surprise to those who saw it happen. It was a sign. We see the same thing with Caiaphas the High Priest in John 11. When the council started conspiring to kill Jesus, Caiaphas says, ***“You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish.”*** John goes on to explain, ***“Now he did not say this on his own initiative, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.”*** So, Caiaphas, is described here as prophesying, that means speaking

on God's behalf. This doesn't mean that he is on the Lord's team in this situation; nevertheless, he prophesies. God spoke through him. The same thing goes for Cornelius in Acts 10-11. The text tells us that as Peter was speaking, the ***"Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message,"*** and they started speaking in tongues. This is before they are baptized (and even before they are described as believing). So again, let's not be surprised that God's Spirit can fall on those who were not necessarily in a right relationship with him. We see it here with Balaam.

In the message itself, Balaam describes himself as someone whose eyes have been opened. He is a seer who can now see! Instead of relying on those omens, he now ***"hears the words of God,"*** he ***"sees the vision of the Almighty."*** He falls down before the Lord in worship, but his eyes are uncovered. And when he opens his eyes, he no longer sees Israel as an enemy who needs to be cursed, but he sees them as being blessed by God – beautiful tents, fertile valleys, gardens, aloes, cedars, flowing water. Balak sees a threat, but Balaam now sees a beautiful nation. Some have suggested this as the opposite of what was intended by Pharaoh. Pharaoh tried to drown the Israelite children in the Nile River, but instead, their seed spread by means of the water. Like Balak, Pharaoh also tried to curse, but instead, the people were blessed, and Pharaoh is the one who ended up being cursed. Instead of extinguishing Israel, they left Egypt much stronger than they were before. This is what happens when you try to curse God's people. He blesses the blessers and curses the cursers, a paraphrase of Genesis 12:3, where God promised Abraham, ***"...I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."***

At the end of the message, we have Balak burning in his anger against Balaam, even to the point that he strikes his hands together. Basically, he claps! He strikes his hands together in anger. He's mad. And we almost see a parallel between this and Balaam striking his donkey. Just as Balaam was mad at his donkey, now we have King Balak mad at Balaam. He's hired Balaam to bring a curse, but he has given a blessing three times now. And in response, Balaam pretty much gets fired, "Get out!" (is the way we would say this today), or maybe, "Leave! And the donkey you came in on!" And then, Balak basically reminds him, "I said I would pay you well, but God has held you back." [paraphrased] This is God's fault! Balak knows how to really hurt a guy like Balaam: Stop payment on that paycheck! But once again, Balaam basically says, "I told you so. I tried to warn you that I could only speak the word of God." [paraphrased] Of course, he wishes this weren't the case, but we'll get back to that next week.

It would have been very easy for Balaam to leave it right here, but he doesn't. He's not getting paid for this, but basically offers to throw in a freebie, "At no cost to you, let me throw in a little bonus prophecy." As he says in verse 14, ***"And now, behold, I am going to my people; come, and I will advise you what this people will do to your people in the days to come."*** In other words: I'm out of here, but wait, there's more!

II. **And this leads us to the fourth and final oracle, where we find that GOD MOST HIGH IS KING: HE CRUSHES HIS ENEMIES.**

Remember: these oracles are getting progressively more severe. This last oracle is found in verses 15-25, as Balaam throws in a few words here at no charge at all. Let's look at Numbers 24:15-25,

¹⁵ ***He took up his discourse and said,***

***"The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor,
And the oracle of the man whose eye is opened,***

***16 The oracle of him who hears the words of God,
And knows the knowledge of the Most High,
Who sees the vision of the Almighty,
Falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered.***

***17 "I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near;
A star shall come forth from Jacob,
A scepter shall rise from Israel,
And shall crush through the forehead of Moab,
And tear down all the sons of Sheth.***

***18 "Edom shall be a possession,
Seir, its enemies, also will be a possession,
While Israel performs valiantly.***

***19 "One from Jacob shall have dominion,
And will destroy the remnant from the city."***

20 And he looked at Amalek and took up his discourse and said,

***"Amalek was the first of the nations,
But his end shall be destruction."***

21 And he looked at the Kenite, and took up his discourse and said,

***"Your dwelling place is enduring,
And your nest is set in the cliff.
22 "Nevertheless Kain will be consumed;
How long will Asshur keep you captive?"***

23 Then he took up his discourse and said,

***"Alas, who can live except God has ordained it?
24 "But ships shall come from the coast of Kittim,
And they shall afflict Asshur and will afflict Eber;
So they also will come to destruction."***

25 Then Balaam arose and departed and returned to his place, and Balak also went his way.

This time, instead of offering sacrifices, instead of relying on sorcery, instead of moving from one place to another at the direction of the king, Balaam just jumps right into it! ***"He took up his discourse and said."*** He says this seven times in these two chapters, ***"He took up his discourse and said," "He took up his discourse and said," "He took up his discourse and said,"*** and so on. One author pointed out that the book of Numbers records seven rebellions by God's people, and now we have a pagan prophet speaking for God seven times. We have a contrast going on. We notice how Balaam refers to himself as ***"the man whose eye is opened."*** He is the man ***"who hears the words of God."*** He is the man who ***"knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty,"*** and once again (as with the third oracle), he is a man who is ***"falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered,"*** perhaps a reference back to the incident with the donkey.

Then, instead of something that's about to happen right then and there, Balaam seems to look into the distant future, ***"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; a star shall come forth from Jacob, a scepter shall rise from Israel."*** Something or someone is coming. We hear this reference to a ***"star,"*** and we might think of the star that led the wise men to Bethlehem (men like Balaam). We might think of that passage from Revelation 22:16, where Jesus is described as being ***"the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star."*** This seems to perhaps be a reference to the prophecy made by Jacob to his son Judah, when he said that ***"...the scepter shall not depart from Judah,"*** a reference to the coming and the rule of Jesus.

And then Balaam shifts back to Moab. This ruler of some kind will ***"crush through the forehead of Moab."*** So, Balaam is basically saying, "You want me to curse the Israelites? Let me tell you about these people. Their king will crush your forehead!" So, "Not only can I not curse them, but they will crush you!" And then, Balaam throws in a number of other surrounding nations. Not only can Israel not be cursed by Balak, but they will crush these other nations as well. These are nations that had harassed Israel in various ways. God will eventually make things right. God Most High is King: He crushes His enemies – a reminder for us today, as we hope to sing in just a few moments, "The Battle Belongs to the Lord," and that is encouraging to us!

Conclusion:

At the end, the text says, ***"Then Balaam arose and departed and returned to his place, and Balak also went his way."*** Balaam leaves, but this is not the end. Balaam still hasn't been paid. He's still looking for a loophole. Next week, if the Lord wills, I hope we can look at that loophole in Numbers 25.

In these two chapters, today and last week, we have seen some progress. We have seen Balaam's eyes opened. He has at least taken a few small steps in the right direction. And this is here for our benefit. As Paul writes in Romans 15:4, ***"For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."*** This passage gives us hope. And I say this, because what Balaam could only see very dimly, way out there in the future somewhere, we can now see clearly. Peter explains this in 2 Peter 1:19 when he says, ***"So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts."*** As we learned this morning, Jesus is the ***"morning star."*** Jesus is the fulfillment of all of this. And looking back on it, we have some advantages Balaam never had. And because we have the ***"prophetic word made more sure,"*** today we have the ability to be a part of God's kingdom. We can be added by God to the eternal kingdom Balaam could only see from a distance. Today, we can be those who bless, and today we can be those who are uncursable. If we can help in any way, we hope you will reach out to us.

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

Our Father in Heaven,

Thank you for the promises of Jesus. Thank you for the prophetic word. We are in awe of your plan for our salvation, revealed slowly but surely over time, as you revealed it in some amazingly unique ways. As we continue to learn from Balaam, we pray that we would come to a deeper appreciation for your word as it lights the path in front of us and as we continue making our way through this dark world.

As a congregation of your people, we ask that you bless Jerry Turley as he is in the hospital today, and we continue to ask that you bless Tyler with strength and courage. Bless Carl and Stacey as well. We are thankful for good medical care here in Madison.

This morning we are thankful for Noah and for the encouragement he's been to us already over the past several weeks. We pray that he would get involved in serving you here in Madison, and we pray that we might be an encouragement to him. We pray that he would connect with Christian friends as we continue to encourage each other.

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

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com