

Numbers 22 • The Way of Balaam

Introduction

The apostle Peter's earthly life was coming to a close. It would not be long before he would suffer martyrdom at the hand of Nero. Although filled with hope and encouragement, his last letter to his flock contains urgent warnings. These warnings focus on the destructive presence of false teachers and false prophets. In 2 Peter 2:15 he writes, "...forsaking the right way, they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness...."

Did you know that there is more said in Scripture about Balaam than there is about Mary the mother of Jesus? There is more said about Balaam than any of the apostles. The Old Testament frequently refers to him, and in the New Testament he is mentioned three times. Why? One reason is as relevant today as it was in Peter's day, and it is called "The Way of Balaam."

¹Then the sons of Israel journeyed, and camped in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan opposite Jericho.

²Now Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. ³So Moab was in great fear because of the people, for they were numerous; and Moab was in dread of the sons of Israel. ⁴Moab said to the elders of Midian, "Now this horde will lick up all that is around us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field." And Balak the son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time.

⁵So he sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor, at Pethor, which is near the River, in the land of the sons of his people, to call him, saying, "Behold, a people came out of Egypt; behold, they cover the surface of the land, and they are living opposite me. ⁶Now, therefore, please come, curse this people for me since they are too mighty for me; perhaps I may be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed."

[Read v.1-6]

Q: Who were the Moabites, what was their relationship to the Israelites, and why were they so afraid of them?

A: The Moabites, together with the Ammonites, were distant cousins of the Israelites, being descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew (Gen. 19:30-38). The Moabites were settled in an area southeast of the Dead Sea which today is a part of Jordan. (The capital of Jordan, Amman, is based on the name Ammon, the Ammonites having settled north of the Moabites.) Also mingled into the region were the Midianites. The Midianites, too, were distant cousins of the Israelites, Midian being the fourth son of Abraham by his second wife, Keturah.

The Moabites were deathly afraid of the approaching Israelites. Why? Because they heard that Israel had just defeated all the other powerful kings in the area: the Canaanite king of Arad, Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan.

Q: Why is it that Moab did not really need to fear being annihilated by the Israelites?

A: Deuteronomy 2:9 explicitly forbade the Israelites from taking land away from the Moabites. Had the Moabites known this, they would have had nothing to fear, and the treachery and tragedy that followed would never have happened.

Q: What was the relationship between Balak son of Zippor and the Midianites?

A: According the Jewish Targum, the Moabites and Midianites had formed an alliance. Alternately, a Midianite or Moabite king would occupy the throne. It is believed that Balak was a Midianite.

Q: What is "the River" that is referred to in verse 5?

A: Most believe it is referring to the Euphrates River.

Q: Why is there a familiar ring to the words, "...he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed"?

A: In ancient eyes, a true prophet was one who got results. Balaam had a reputation for getting results, and mostly in the arena of curses. It is an ironic twist to what God told Abraham in Genesis 12:3. (*And 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.*) If Balaam was aware of this statement, then to curse Israel would have resulted in himself being cursed by God.

Application: *Is there an area of your life where your lack of understanding, or lack of belief in God's Word, has led you to make bad decisions? For example, God promises that He will supply all our needs. Have you ever bought a lottery ticket or gambled? To do so is to fail to trust God to supply all your needs. Are there other areas of your life where trust is needed?*

[Read v.7-21]

⁷So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the fees for divination in their hand; and they came to Balaam and repeated Balak's words to him. ⁸He said to them, "Spend the night here, and I will bring word back to you as the LORD may speak to me." And the leaders of Moab stayed with Balaam.

⁹Then God came to Balaam and said, "Who are these men with you?"

¹⁰Balaam said to God, "Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent word to me, ¹¹Behold, there is a people who came out of Egypt and they cover the surface of the land; now come, curse them for me; perhaps I may be able to fight against them and drive them out."

¹²God said to Balaam, "Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed."

¹³So Balaam arose in the morning and said to Balak's leaders, "Go back to your land, for the LORD has refused to let me go with you."

¹⁴The leaders of Moab arose and went to Balak and said, "Balaam refused to come with us."

¹⁵Then Balak again sent leaders, more numerous and more distinguished than the former. ¹⁶They came to Balaam and said to him, "Thus says Balak the son of Zippor, 'Let nothing, I beg you, hinder you from coming to me; ¹⁷for I will indeed honor you richly, and I will do whatever you say to me. Please come then, curse this people for me.'"

¹⁸Balaam replied to the servants of Balak, "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, either small or great, contrary to the command of the LORD my God. ¹⁹Now please, you also stay here tonight, and I will find out what else the Lord will speak to me."

²⁰God came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If the men have come to call you, rise up and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you shall you do."

²¹So Balaam arose in the morning, and saddled his donkey and went with the leaders of Moab.

Q: What are the indications that Balaam did indeed have communication with the God of the Israelites?

- First, in verse 8, Balaam uses the proper name for God, the name given to Moses at the burning bush.
- Second, in verse 12, God informs Balaam that he should not curse them because they are blessed.
- Third, in verse 18, Balaam refers to God as "the LORD my God," again using the proper name for God.

Q: What verse demonstrates Balaam's weakness and his personal agenda, and why?

A: Verse 19. The Lord has already told Balaam not to return with the elders of Moab to Balak, but Balaam insists on seeking once again the Lord's counsel. Why? Most likely Balaam, who makes his living as a prophet, is enticed by the offer of money for his services and is looking for a loophole.

Q: In verse 20, God appears to have changed His mind. Why?

A: God has not reversed His position, otherwise He would have advised Balaam to go ahead and curse the people. However, He agrees to grant Balaam's wishes to go with the elders. If Balaam insists on going with the elders, then God will use Balaam to bless instead of curse His people. Granting Balaam's insistence upon going with the elders, however, results in an action that Balaam will eventually regret.

Application: *Have you ever approached God repeatedly for something that He already appears to have said "No" to? Or, have you begged Him for something that you know isn't in your best interest, but you desperately wanted it (him, her) anyway? Have you ever pursued a relationship that you knew wasn't a healthy or righteous one, but you asked God to bless it anyway? We call this bargaining. Why, and what is the motive behind it?*

²²But God was angry because he was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as an adversary against him. Now he was riding on his donkey and his two servants were with him.

²³When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand, the donkey turned off from the way and went into the field; but Balaam struck the donkey to turn her back into the way. ²⁴Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path of the vineyards, with a wall on this side and a wall on that side. ²⁵When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pressed herself to the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall, so he struck her again.

²⁶The angel of the LORD went further, and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn to the right hand or the left. ²⁷When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam; so Balaam was angry and struck the donkey with his stick.

²⁸And the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?"

²⁹Then Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a mockery of me! If there had been a sword in my hand, I would have killed you by now."

³⁰The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I ever been accustomed to do so to you?"

And he said, "No."

³¹Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed all the way to the ground. ³²The angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out as an adversary, because your way was contrary to me. ³³But the donkey saw me and turned aside from me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, I would surely have killed you just now, and let her live."

³⁴Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the way against me. Now then, if it is displeasing to you, I will turn back."

³⁵But the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but you shall

[Read v.22-35]

Q: In verse 22, it appears that God has changed His mind once again by becoming angry that Balaam agreed to go with the elders. Does this represent inconsistency on God's part? Is God being fickle?

A: The reason for God's apparent change of tactics are twofold.

- First, God is truly angry at Balaam because He knows that Balaam is not really interested in serving Him and blessing His people, but rather interested in the "fees of divination." God knows Balaam's hidden motives and his desire for personal gain.
- Second, God's anger on the road serves as a stern warning to Balaam. This is the second time God has repeated to Balaam the words, "...you shall speak only the word which I tell you." This implies that Balaam has hidden motives and cannot be trusted.

Q: What is the point of the incident between the donkey and Balaam?

A: An ass can see God's will, but a greedy person will always look for a way around it. Balaam, familiar with the supernatural, is not at all shocked by the fact that God caused his donkey to speak.

Q: What is the key phrase in verse 32, what does it mean, and what is its significance?

A: The key phrase is, "...your way is contrary to me." This is the source of the Peter's use of the phrase, "the way of Balaam." The word "way" refers to Balaam's choices based on his heart. Balaam loves money more than he loves God's people. He will do anything for money, even if it includes selling out God's people. The significance is that the true nature of Balaam's heart is greed. Thus, he is using his spiritual gifts for personal gain.

Application: Can you recall anyone in the Lord's work who has used his or her spiritual gifts for personal gain? (Personal gain does not always come in the form of money. It could be ambition, fame, power or the admiration of others.) Do Christian TV personalities fit into this category? Have you yourself ever sought a type of personal gain through your spiritual gift, such as teaching or music composition or performance?

Q: What does verse 34 tell us about Balaam's character?

A: He knows God, he communicates with God, he has spiritual gifts from God, and he recognizes such defects as personal sin. Yet there is something in Balaam that is constantly warring against his spiritual side; that is, financial gain and greed. His mind and knowledge is warning him to turn back, but his heart is driving him to keep going. Why? He doesn't want this golden opportunity to pass him by, and he keeps looking and hoping for a way to make it all work out to his benefit.

speaking only the word which I tell you.” So Balaam went along with the leaders of Balak.

³⁶When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, which is on the Arnon border, at the extreme end of the border.

³⁷Then Balak said to Balaam, “Did I not urgently send to you to call you? Why did you not come to me? Am I really unable to honor you?”

³⁸So Balaam said to Balak, “Behold, I have come now to you! Am I able to speak anything at all? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I shall speak.”

³⁹And Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-huzoth. ⁴⁰Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and sent some to Balaam and the leaders who were with him.

⁴¹Then it came about in the morning that Balak took Balaam and brought him up to the high places of Baal, and he saw from there a portion of the people.

¹⁶“Behold, these caused the sons of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, so the plague was among the congregation of the LORD.

[Read v.36-41]

Q: What is the conflict Balaam is facing now that he has reached Moab and Balak?

A: He is conflicted by the fact that his purpose in responding to Balak’s invitation is to receive great monetary rewards, but his hands are tied from doing so.

Chapters 23-24 complete the story of Balaam’s journey to Moab. During the course of his stay with Balak, instead of cursing Israel, he blesses God’s people with four oracles. The fourth oracle (24:15-24) informs Balak of what is in store for the Moabites at the hand of God’s people. As a result, Balak is furious with Balaam and threatens to cancel all promises of monetary payment for his services (24:11). But surely, can’t Balaam find a way to obey God and at the same time get paid by Balak?

Chapter 25 recounts the unfortunate event surrounding “the sin of Peor.” Many Israelites fall for the enticements of the Moabite women (25:1) and 24,000 die as a result of the Lord’s anger against His people. How could this have happened? (It was at Balaam’s suggestion.)

Chapter 31 recounts God’s vengeance against the Midianites. Verse 8 tells us that Balaam himself was killed (possibly an assassination party sent to his home at Pethor). The reason?

[Read 31:16]

Q: According to chapters 23-24, Balaam obeyed God by speaking only the words that God told him to speak. What did he do, however, to ensure that he received payment for his services?

A: It is clear from this verse that he devised a plan to get God to turn against His people. It seems obvious that he advised Balak to tempt the Israelites with Moabite men and women (priests and priestesses, according to Hebrew tradition). As a result, the Israelites committed apostasy and idolatry. Balaam knew that he himself could not curse the Israelites; he was powerless to do so. But he could come up with a plan to kindle God’s anger against His own people by having them sin against Him: “So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor, and the Lord was angry against Israel” (25:3).

Q: Can you summarize, then, the “way of Balaam”?

A: The “way of Balaam” is seeking personal gain, usually with money, in the name of the Lord. Such greed will always result in harm to God’s people.

Final Application

Come up with a plan to discern whether or not a Christian leader or well-known Christian personality (performer, preacher, evangelist, “healer,” author, talk-show host) may be participating in “the way of Balaam.”