

November 3, 2024

“Heroes & Villains: Balaam & the Donkey”

Numbers 22:4-6

### **Intro:**

I wonder if when Balaam was put to death by the sword (see Numbers 31:8) if he was given the opportunity for “any last words”. Maybe that’s just a TV and movies sort of thing. I do wonder what those words might have been though. The humor side of my imagination thinks he might have said “I should have listened to the donkey”.

### **Balaam:**

Balaam (and his famous donkey) are found in the book of Numbers starting at chapter 22. He features prominently in chapters 23 and 24, but then there is little said about him until his death and the reason for it, in chapter 31. He is then used as a cautionary example in the New Testament books of 2 Peter, Jude, and Revelation.

Balaam is a prophet. He is a seer who, while not from one of the tribes of Israel, is given prophet gifting from God. An entrepreneurial spirit, he uses this prophet gift for good financial gain, hiring himself out in the business of blessing and cursing. In his day, whether someone (or a group of someones , like an army) was under a blessing or a curse mattered quite a bit in assessing the likely outcome of a conflict. A cursed army would be easier to defeat, for example.

As such, it was a common practice among the various kings of the day to employ specially gifted people to pronounce blessings on their own army and curses on the armies of their enemies. Balaam was in this business.

We hear about him because Balak, the king of the Moabites, knows about him and sends his messengers out to offer him a service contract to curse the massive Israelite army that is camping in the Moabite territory. The contract involves a substantial retainer for services rendered.

Surprisingly, and this is where things get a bit confused as to whether Balaam is a hero or a villain. Balaam doesn't accept the offer right away, but takes time to consult God on the matter. God tells Balaam he should not take this contract, and that is the response that Balaam gives to Balak's messengers – "God told me not to go with you". So far, things are sounding very much on the up and up.

Balak sends his messengers to Balaam a second time. In this second message, he appeals entirely to Balaam's reputation as someone who likes to be paid for his services. The offer is for even more payment, which shows Balak's desperation. It also shows us a bit of Balaam's character. Balaam has already been given a "no" from God on this. Doing it shouldn't even be a consideration. But it is. After the second offer is given, Balaam goes back to God to see if He will change his mind.

Surprisingly, God does change his mind. He tells Balaam to go, but only to say what God tells him to say. This is agreeable (Balaam is seeing dollar signs in his eyes), and so he sets off to meet with the king.

On the way, we have the strange encounter of the talking donkey.

Something about the whole situation is still not sitting right with God, and so He sends an angel to block the road. This prevents Balaam from going to meet with Balak. Balaam doesn't know the angel is there, but the donkey sees, or at least senses him, and does everything in its power to avoid him. The donkey runs off into a field, smashes Balaam against a wall in an effort to sneak past, and ultimately just lies down on the ground when it is clear that there is no way past this angel.

You can imagine how odd this scene must have appeared to Balak's messengers who were accompanying Balaam back to Moab...

Everything seems normal when all of a sudden, Balaam and his donkey bolt off the road and start heading across the fields. Maybe they call out after him.

Probably they just stand there in stunned silence. Eventually, Balaam gets control of the donkey and beats it into submission. A short way further down the road, the donkey suddenly pushes to the side of the road and appears to be trying to push Balaam into the solid wall that lined the road at that point. Again, Balaam lays into the donkey and gets it back into the middle of the road. A bit further and there is trouble with the donkey again. This time, instead of running off in the direction it is supposed to, it just lies down on the road. Balaam jumps off and gives it a beating with his staff.

Then the funniest thing happens. Balaam stops what he is doing and begins to have what looks like a conversation with the donkey. People talk to their animals all the time, but never does the animal talk back. But that is what it looks like. To the messengers, it looks like Balaam might have lost his sanity. To add to the strangeness of the situation, after the short conversation with the donkey (during which it appears that Balaam apologizes to it), he looks down the road and begins to talk to... no one!

In that conversation Balaam is again being given permission by God to go and meet Balak, but only to say what God tells him to say. It must have felt very confusing to Balaam – God says don't go, then go, then clearly don't go (angel blocking the road and all), and then go again.

The end of Numbers 22 finds Balaam meeting with Balak and assuring him that he will only speak what God tells him to speak. Chapters 23 and 24 recount the three solicited proclamations of Balaam over the Israelites. In each case, there is a great show of divination and consulting with God (Balaam is a showman, after all), and in each case God tells Balaam to proclaim a blessing on the Israelites, and not the curse that Balak had been looking for. Underneath Balaam's piety, it's not the message he was hoping for either. The third time, he doesn't even bother with the divination or show of seeking God – possibly because he doesn't want to give another message that will go against the purpose for which he was being hired.

Not surprisingly, Balak is not satisfied and fires Balaam. Balaam gives one final curse against the Moabites and a blessing on the Israelites, and then heads home.

This is the end, except that it isn't. Later on in chapter 31 we find Balaam being put to death alongside the 5 Moabite kings, and in the New Testament (2 Peter, Jude and Revelation) we find him mentioned in unflattering terms as one who seduces and leads people astray. How did we get from delivering the blessings that God wanted him to deliver, to being an enemy of the state and blacklisted in the letters?

### **The Caution of Balaam:**

The villainy of Balaam, and the cautionary word for us, is found in between the texts. Balaam had a gift, but he wanted to use that gift for his own power, prestige, and wealth. He sold the gift he had for blessings and curses to whoever would pay him. It gained him a reputation and made him important. Even though he listened when God told him not to go (and then to go, and then not to go, and then to go again), it was only after he had asked twice to take on the contract. Like a child who hopes to get something by asking enough times, Balaam hoped that he would be able to cash in on the reward that Balak was offering. When that didn't happen, when he was sent packing at the end of Numbers 24, it seemed that things weren't settled for him.

We need to look a bit into chapter 25. This chapter tells the tale of a plague that afflicted the Israelites because while they were camped at Shittim (or Acacia Grove, as the NLT translates it), some of the men went off and had sex with the Moabite women who were in the area. As if that wasn't bad enough, they also offered sacrifices to the Moabite gods, presumably as a way to gain even more sexual favours. This subversion of Israelite worship was also influenced by Midianite women. The end result was God telling Moses to attack the Moabites and the Midianites, which ultimately ends in chapter 31 with the death of the five kings, and Balaam, who was presumably in their company.

Taking this part of the narrative, and reading it with what is said about Balaam in the New Testament passages, it seems that Balaam was not content just to walk away from all the wealth that Balak offered. While he was not able to directly pronounce a curse on the Israelites, he could suggest other ways to cause them harm and thus earn his pay. It seems that he went back to Balak and his friends and directed them to undermine the Israelite worship by sending in the women to seduce them into worshipping the Baals of Peor.

**Conclusion:**

Balaam had a gift. He had a prophetic gift that was given to him by God. The problem is that Balaam wanted to use that gift for his own gain and power. Ultimately that desire for power and fortune was his undoing. If he had listened to his donkey, he might not have become such a bad villain. But he didn't listen, and he became a villain.

The desire for power and fame and fortune is a subtle problem that still finds its way into the church today. As Christians, we are given gifts, or talents, from the Holy Spirit to bring blessing to other believers and to point people to God. But all too often, those gifts are used in selfish ways. Pastors start up churches to feed their own desire for power, and in those cases they end up having entirely way too much control and influence over the lives of the people in their congregations. It is not God's church; it is their church.

Other Christians use the gift they have been given to gain fame. The healing or prophetic word they are gifted with is used to build world-wide recognition. Gifts that are manifestations of the Holy Spirit become part of a production centered on the individual and aimed at gain. It is their show, and it is only because of them that people who tune in will be healed or hear a prophetic word for themselves.

Make no mistake, that is all a form of idolatry. God is not the focus, and those claiming to act in God's name are really doing so to further their own name. God works through humility, not pride. When He is at work, He should be the center of

that work, not the person He is working through. It is not for our glory that God has given His Spirit, but for His own.

In the use of the gifts that we have been given by God, we must seek humility. In following others who make public use of their gifts, we must use discernment to determine if they are seeking God's glory or their own. In Revelation 2, Jesus says that we are held accountable for discerning true works of God, not just those who attempt to lead people astray.

Let's pray.