

Balaam and His Donkey

(Numbers 22:1-35)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Numbers

I. Introduction

- a. We are now in the last year or two of the 40 years (or 42 in the LXX; compare **Joshua 5:5-6**) that the Israelites would spend in the desert, before entering the Promised Land.
- b. The Israelites encountered four nations as they pass northward in their journey through the Wilderness toward Canaan, the Promised Land:
 - i. Edomites (descendants of Esau)
 - ii. Moabites and Ammonites (descendants of Lot)
 - iii. Amorites (a depraved nation)
 1. They attacked Israel and were then wiped out by the Israelites.
 2. The lands of Sihon and Og, two Amorite kings, became the inheritance for 2-1/2 tribes, east of the Jordan.
 3. The victory over Sihon and Og inspired the Israelites for generations and struck fear into the hearts of their enemies.
 - a. That reaction by their enemies set the stage for our lesson today, regarding the story of Balaam.

II. Introduction to Balaam

- a. **Question:** Why should the story of Balaam matter to us?
 - i. Jesus, Peter and Jude all make mention of it and assume that those they are addressing know the story. Important warnings are given to Christians based on things in the life of Balaam. (**Revelation 2:14, 2 Peter 2:15-16** and **Jude 11**)
 - ii. There are important, under-appreciated prophecies about Jesus that are announced by Balaam, about 1400 years before the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.
 1. Several early Christian writers pointed to prophecies given through Balaam as being important.
 2. Detailed, fulfilled prophecies like this can strengthen and confirm our faith.

- b. **Questions:** Was Balaam a good man, or was he wicked? Or both? Or, is it more complicated than that?
- i. Many men in Scripture start off good and become bad, or vice versa. Examples:
 1. Solomon started off good but ended bad.
 2. Manasseh started off bad but repented and ended good.
 - ii. David started off good, became bad (adultery with Bathsheba and murdered Uriah, her husband). However, after that, he repented and ended up relatively good.
 - iii. In my opinion, Balaam's spiritual life in **Numbers** went through four stages. He started off good, went bad (to the point where the Angel of the Lord planned to kill him), repented and became good, then ended up VERY BAD.
 1. He was a complicated person, and there is much for us to learn from his life.
 2. In this message, we will cover the first three phases, with the fourth phase to be addressed in the subsequent message.
- c. My own introduction to the story of Balaam and his donkey.
- i. My father was County Administrator in the New Jersey county where we lived. He and other government officials were attending a speech by the new state Commissioner of the State Department of Environmental Protection, who happened to be Jewish. This was in 1974. The Commissioner was speaking about the signs from nature that we were in trouble. He said that if we did not heed these warning signs, we would end up in big trouble. He said it was like "Balaam's ass".
 - ii. All the government officials present (including my father) nodded in assent to what the Commissioner said. However, none of them (mostly from Christian backgrounds) had *any idea* what it meant!
 - iii. My father, when he came home, asked me (a college student at the time) what "Balaam's ass" referred to!
 1. Of course, the term "ass" is the older term for the animal, as found in the KJV.
 2. Most modern translations, such as the NKJV, generally use the term "donkey". That is a different word for the same animal, found throughout the Scriptures as a lowly beast of burden.

- iv. By the end of the current lesson, you will be able to fully appreciate what none of the people present at that meeting understood!
- d. Archaeological evidence for Balaam son of Beor, the seer.
 - i. After teaching this lesson, one of those listening (Mark Felsher) brought to my attention an archaeological discovery that confirms the existence of Balaam son of Beor in the ancient world.
 - ii. In 1967, the *Deir 'Alla Balaam Inscription* was discovered in Jordan. This inscription has been dated variously in the range of 600-800 BC. It speaks of a "Balaam, son of Beor", a pagan prophet or seer in the ancient Middle East, who had prophesied doom to his own people.
 - iii. There are several references online that give further information on this archaeological discovery, including:
 - 1. <https://biblicalarchaeologygraves.blogspot.com/2014/12/bonus-38-deir-alla-balaam-inscription.html>

III. Balak, King of Moab, Calls for Balaam's Help

- a. Round One: Balak's first attempt.
 - i. Read **Numbers 22:1-14**.
 - ii. Storyline:
 - 1. Balak, the Moabite king, sees the huge number of Israelites camped near his people and saw how they decimated the Amorites (who had been under Sihon and Og).
 - 2. He sends ambassadors to Balaam, who lives near "the river" (a term which generally refers to the Euphrates River, quite a distance away, in Mesopotamia). He wants Balaam to come and curse the Israelites.
 - a. Balak sees Balaam as having access to great spiritual power; "He whom you bless is blessed, and whom you curse is cursed."
 - b. The ambassadors have the divining fee with them.
 - i. Another English translation of the LXX text renders this as the ambassadors having with them "the instruments of divination".

1. "...and the *instruments of divination* were in their hands..." (**Numbers 22:7**, NETS, LXX)
 - ii. Translations based on the Masoretic Text typically render this expression as the ambassadors having with them the "fees for divination", or something equivalent.
 1. "So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed *with the fees for divination* in their hand..." (**Numbers 22:7**, ESV)
 2. "So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the diviner's fee in their hand..." (**Numbers 22:7**, NKJV)
3. Balaam consults the Lord and obeys the Lord's instruction not to go back with the men.
 - a. Balaam certainly appears to be a righteous man.
 - b. He consults God, and God speaks to him personally. Balaam obeys the command of God, turns down the offer for money, and is not willing to go with the men.
- b. Round Two: Balak's second attempt.
 - i. Read **Numbers 22:15-20**.
 - ii. Storyline:
 1. Balak sends even more prominent rulers back to Balaam with the promise of great financial reward if he complies.
 2. Again, Balaam takes the principled stance. He says even if they promised to give him a house full of silver and gold, he would not do beyond what the word of the Lord told him. Amen!
 3. Balaam again inquires of the Lord that night. The Lord tells Balaam he may go with the men, BUT must speak ONLY the words that the Lord tells him to speak.
- c. The incident with the Angel of the Lord and the donkey.
 - i. Read **Numbers 22:20-35**.
 - ii. Storyline:

1. Balaam goes with the men (which the Lord had approved, with one restriction: he must say ONLY what the Lord tells him to say). He is mounted on his faithful donkey, with two of his servants accompanying him.
2. The Lord is angry, and 'the Angel of God' (also referred to as 'the Angel of the Lord' in **Numbers 22:31**) is sent to kill Balaam, with drawn sword in hand.
3. The donkey sees the Angel of the Lord, but Balaam does not. The donkey tries three times to avoid his master's death at the hands of the Angel of the Lord.
 - a. First time, the donkey turns aside off the road and into a field. Balaam beats the donkey with his staff.
 - b. Second time, in a narrow path between vineyard walls, the donkey pushes against one of the walls and crushes the foot of Balaam. He beats the donkey for a second time.
 - c. Third time, the Angel of the Lord appears in the narrow, walled path. The donkey lays down under Balaam, and the prophet beats her a third time.
4. Then the Lord "opens the mouth of the donkey", who speaks to Balaam, asking why she is being treated so badly.
 - a. To me, the most incredible part of the story is not that the donkey speaks to Balaam. After all, the Lord has performed many extraordinary miracles in the Bible. With God, nothing is impossible. The most incredible thing to me here is that Balaam *foolishly argues back* to his talking donkey!
 - i. I would have expected to see the prophet stopped dead in his tracks when he heard the voice of his donkey speaking! However, that is not how Balaam responds. Instead, he carries on a conversation with the animal, as if this was nothing out of the ordinary!
 - b. Then the Lord opens the eyes of Balaam, who is now able to see the Angel of the Lord with drawn sword. He bows down and "*worships*" (prostrates himself in veneration to) the Angel of the Lord (**Numbers 22:31**).

- i. Note that the Greek word for “worship” here in the Septuagint is: proskuneo / προσκυνέω.
- ii. That is the same word found in the 10 Commandments when the Lord tells the Jews not to have any other gods not make any idols for themselves, and not to “worship or serve them” (**Exodus 20:5** in the LXX, and as quoted by Jesus in the New Testament, in **Matthew 4:10**).
- iii. The same Greek word also is used *twice* in **Revelation 22**, when John mistakenly attempts to worship an angel, and the angel tells him not to do that!
 - 1. “Now I, John, saw and heard these things. And when I heard and saw, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel who showed me these things. Then he said to me, ‘See that you do not do that. For I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren the prophets, and of those who keep the words of this book. Worship God.’” (**Revelation 22:8–9**, NKJV)
- iv. The same Greek word is used to explain that Jesus received worship from men as well as angels (**Matthew 28:9, 28:17; Luke 24:52** and **Hebrews 1:6**).
 - 1. As seen by the above Scriptures, receiving worship (in this sense) is something that only God is worthy of.
 - 2. Angels (which are created beings) are not to be worshiped.
- v. Please keep all this in mind related to the ‘deep dive’ into “the Angel of the Lord” which follows!
- c. The Angel of the Lord explains that He was about to kill Balaam, if it was not for the donkey saving Balaam’s life. He repeats the instructions that Balaam can continue with the men, but must speak **ONLY** what the Lord tells him to say.
 - i. From this, I would assume that in the course of his traveling with the men, Balaam’s mind had

changed, and he was planning to cave and sell out for the money.

- ii. Therefore, I believe Balaam had gone from 'good' to 'bad' at this point, before the Angel of the Lord put the fear of God into him and brought him to repent!

IV. Who is "the Angel of God / the Angel of the Lord"?

- a. **Question:** Does the term "the Angel of the Lord" refer to one of the angels or to someone more specific?
- b. Early Christian writers, when explaining the divinity of Christ, the Son of God (especially when addressing this to Jews), relied primarily on passages *from the Old Testament*, such as the ones we are about to discuss.
 - i. This is in contrast to modern Christians, who typically rely almost exclusively on New Testament passages (such as from **John 1** and **Hebrews 1**) to defend the divinity of Christ.
- c. We first encountered that term in **Genesis** and **Exodus**.
 - i. In **Genesis 16:7-14**, when Hagar runs away from Sarah, she is intercepted by "the angel of the Lord", who tells her to return.
 - 1. After that encounter, it says, "Then Hagar called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, 'You are the God who sees me', for she said, 'I have seen the One who appeared to me face to face.'" (**Genesis 16:13**, LXX, OSB)
 - ii. In **Genesis 22:10-19**, "the angel of the Lord" speaks to Abraham in the episode where he is told to sacrifice his son Isaac on the mountain.
 - 1. In the LXX, it says, "Thus Abraham called the place 'the Lord has appeared'; as it was said to this day, 'In the mountain the Lord was seen'". (**Genesis 22:14**, LXX, OSB)
 - iii. Read **Exodus 3**, it says that "the Angel of the Lord" spoke to Moses from the burning bush.
 - 1. Read **Exodus 3:1-6**.
 - 2. Here it appears that 'the Angel of the Lord' is speaking as if He is God.
- d. Several early Christian writers used passages like these, as well as the story of 'the Lord' having lunch with Abraham in **Genesis 18** and the account of

Jacob wrestling with God all night in **Genesis 32**, as *theophanies*. A '*theophany*' is an appearance of the Son of God in the Old Testament.

- i. Read **Genesis 32:22-32**.
- ii. The foundational concepts behind this include:
 1. The Son of God, the Word of God, is fully divine and was begotten of the Father before all ages.
 - a. **John 1:1-18**, He was in the beginning with God, and was God. All things were made through Him.
 - b. **Micah 5:1-2**, "His origins are from eternity".
 2. It is impossible for anyone to see God the Father, Who "dwells in unapproachable light". No one has seen Him or can see Him. (**John 1:18, 1 Timothy 6:14-16**)
 - a. He fills all things and, therefore, cannot be located or isolated within any one point in space.
 - b. He (the Father) cannot *ascend* from the earth nor *descend* to the earth.
 3. However, the Son of God, who is not a created being but is fully divine, therefore also can be referred to as 'God'. He can appear in the form of a human being (or an angel), and can be seen.
 4. From Justin Martyr, an early Christian writer, c. 160 AD:
 - a. "Now the Word of God is His Son, as we have before said. And He is called Angel and Apostle; for He declares whatever we ought to know, and is sent forth to declare whatever is revealed; as our Lord Himself says, 'He that heareth Me, heareth Him that sent Me.' (**Luke 10:16**) From the writings of Moses also this will be manifest; for thus it is written in them, 'And the Angel of God spoke to Moses, in a flame of fire out of the bush, and said, I am that I am, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of your fathers; go down into Egypt, and bring forth My people.' (**Exodus 3:6**)
 - b. "And if you wish to learn what follows, you can do so from the same writings; for it is impossible to relate the whole here. But so much is written for the sake of proving that Jesus the Christ is the Son of God and His Apostle, being of old the Word, and appearing

sometimes in the form of fire, and sometimes in the likeness of angels; but now, by the will of God, having become man for the human race, He endured all the sufferings which the devils instigated the senseless Jews to inflict upon Him; who, though they have it expressly affirmed in the writings of Moses, 'And the Angel of God spoke to Moses in a flame of fire in a bush, and said, I am that I am, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob...' (**Exodus 3:6**)."

i. (Source: Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chapter 63; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 184)

5. Early Christians understood that when someone 'saw the Lord' in the Old Testament (such as in **Isaiah 6:1-5**, as explained in **John 12:41**), or when it speaks of "the Angel of the Lord" (as opposed to one of the angels, such as Gabriel or Michael), they were seeing *the Son of God*.
 - a. They saw the Son of God, the Word of God, as interceding in human events multiple times *prior to* His incarnation as Jesus.
 - b. As the Word of God, He announces the Father's will to men and to the angels.
 - c. Also, note that the Greek word translated 'angel' (angelos / ἄγγελος) also means 'messenger'. That same word is applied to a human messenger, John the Baptist, in **Matthew 11:10** and **Mark 1:2** (following **Malachi 3:1** in the LXX).
 - d. For more on this, see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, article on 'Angel of the Lord'.
- iii. Early Christian writer Irenaeus (who in his youth had been taught by Polycarp, who in turn had been taught by the apostle John), bishop of the church in Lyons, in modern-day France, writing c. 180 AD:
 1. "Now the angel who appeared to Balaam was the Word Himself; and in His hand He held a sword, to indicate the power which He had from above."
 - a. (Source: Irenaeus of Lyons, *Fragments*; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 572)

- b. Here Irenaeus is specifically identifying “the Angel of the Lord” in the **Numbers 22** account as the Word of God (= the Son of God).
- c. This statement by Irenaeus is particularly interesting to me because Irenaeus in his youth had learned from Polycarp, who in turn had been taught by the apostle John. Therefore, Irenaeus was only one human link removed from the apostles.
- e. Think about that. Thus far, we have seen the Son of God foreshadowed throughout the book of **Numbers**.
 - i. **Numbers 9** – the Passion foreshadowed, in the Passover Lamb observance.
 - ii. **Numbers 13** – the name ‘Jesus’ revealed: the one who would complete the mission begun by Moses. (The name ‘Joshua’ in the Hebrew language is the same as ‘Jesus’ in the Greek language, as found in the LXX.)
 - iii. **Numbers 19** – the red heifer and water of purification, foreshadowing the death of Christ outside the camp and the water of baptism.
 - iv. **Numbers 20** – the rock in the Wilderness (= Christ; see **1 Corinthians 10:4**) that gave water (= the Holy Spirit; see **John 4:10-14** and **7:38-39**) and was to be struck by the wood (the cross) only once.
 - v. **Numbers 21** – the bronze serpent that must be “lifted up” for those suffering the fatal bite of sin to be saved, as Jesus Himself explained in **John 3:14**.
 - vi. In **Numbers 23-34**, which we plan to cover in the next lesson, we will see some amazing *prophecies about Jesus*, including related to His resurrection, from the mouth of Balaam.
 - vii. We have all of the above remarkable foreshadowings of Jesus revealed in the book of **Numbers**. However, here in **Numbers 22**, in the appearance of the Angel of the Lord, early Christian recognized *the Son of God appearing in the story, Himself!*
- f. What we learn about the Son of God from this encounter.
 - i. Do not mess with Him. We need to heed what He says. He bears a sword.

1. This aspect of the Son of God reminds me of the scene in **Revelation 19**.
 - a. “Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. Now *out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations*. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.” (**Revelation 19:11–16**, NKJV)
 - ii. He comes to us with a strong message, but it is for our own good. He wants to *save us*, not destroy us.
 - iii. He is both kind and just.
 1. He explains that even in killing Balaam for his sin, He would have spared the donkey from destruction. No collateral damage. Only the guilty party would be destroyed.
 2. He sees the evil that is *in our hearts*. On the outside, Balaam looked and sounded good. He said all the right things and appeared to be doing what the Lord directed. However, his heart was corrupted. The Lord knew and was not going to put up with that.
 3. If we repent, he will not use the sword against us. He was about to kill Balaam, but changed His plan when Balaam repented. The Lord does not want anyone to perish; he wants to give us an opportunity to repent, no matter how foolish or wicked we have been.
 - iv. He does not play favorites.
 1. Thus far in **Numbers**, we have seen that the Lord holds even the most prominent leaders accountable. That included:
 - a. Korah and those with him, who were Levites (**Numbers 16**); and.

- b. Aaron the high priest, and Miriam the sister of Moses (**Numbers 12**); and now
 - c. Balaam, a prophet of God who communicated directly with the Lord, who will issue timeless prophecies by the power of the Holy Spirit (**Numbers 22-24**).
2. Balaam was a famous prophet. People came from far away and sought him out because of his reputation for spiritual power.
 - a. He spoke with God directly. God had answered his prayers.
 - b. He was admired by kings and nobles.
3. However, the Angel of the Lord did not treat Balaam as 'special'. If anything, He expected more from Balaam.
 - a. As Jesus said: "And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more." (**Luke 12:47-48**, NKJV)
4. Peter warns us in **2 Peter** that just as there were false prophets in the past, there will be false teachers in the church. Many struggle with their faith when they see corruption in church leaders. However, that has always been the case. Jesus and the apostles warn us repeatedly that this will happen. However, they also warn us that those people will be dealt with by the Lord.
 - a. We are assured that in the end, no one will 'get away with' anything.
 - b. Read **2 Peter 2:1-3** and **2:10-17**.
 - i. "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you...."
 - ii. "They have forsaken the right way and have gone astray, *following the way of Balaam*, who loved the wages of unrighteousness...."

- iii. "... but he was rebuked for his iniquity: a dumb donkey, speaking with a man's voice, restrained *the madness of the prophet.*"
- c. Some people in the church, even leaders, will start off on the right path (as Balaam did) but will go astray.
 - i. We should not be shocked if (or when) we discover things like that within the church.
- d. Read **2 Peter 2:18-22** and **3:8-9**.
 - i. There are some who will "know the way of righteousness" and then depart.
 - ii. Like a pig that is washed, going back to wallowing in the mud.
 - iii. God uses *dogs, pigs and donkeys* to teach us lessons!
- v. God is serious about calling us to repent, to get back on the right path and to stay there.
 - 1. The Lord insisted that Balaam follow exactly what He said, what He had told him in the beginning.
- g. We can learn important lessons from the interaction with the donkey.
 - i. *God can do anything.* He can raise the dead, part the Red Sea, stop the sun in the sky, bring water from a rock, and even loosen the tongue of a donkey and allow the animal to talk!
 - 1. As the angel Gabriel said to Mary when she was told that although she was a virgin she would give birth to a son, "...For with God nothing will be impossible." (**Luke 1:37**).
 - ii. Sometimes others may see spiritual danger that you don't see. They may see the Son of God more clearly than you do; or they may see it *before* you do.
 - 1. With that in mind, we should be careful not to 'beat up' on those who are trying to help us spiritually, who may see dangers that we do not yet see.
 - 2. The donkey was a true, faithful friend. He crushed the foot of Balaam, but was doing that to save his life.
 - 3. May we be faithful friends to others, like that donkey.

4. Also, when others warn us that we are on the path to destruction, pay attention and listen. Even if the other person seems to us like a dumb (two-legged) donkey, pay attention to their warning. They may be wiser than we are. They may see things we are missing. They may be seeing *the Son of God*.