

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

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Numbers 22 (read vv.6-13) “Balaam & the Talking Donkey”

Intro. The story of Balaam is one of the strangest stories in the Bible. Some commentators consider him a genuine prophet of God. Others say he was a religious racketeer. Was Balaam sincerely seeking to serve God, or was he a fake, a phony? He may have been a bit of both. I'm afraid that there are quite a few preachers today who are in religion as a business.

Either way, Balaam was certainly an important character of the Old Testament. Did you know that there is more said in Scripture about Balaam than there is about Mary, the mother of Jesus? Even the New Testament mentions him three times, and each time it is in connection with apostasy. In 2 Peter we are told about the way of Balaam. In Jude we are told about the error of Balaam. In Revelation we are told about the doctrine of Balaam. In Mic. 6:5 Micah is telling Israel that they had better not forget him. Of course, we have 3 chapters in Numbers devoted to Balaam. So I think we have some things to learn from what happened to Balaam, & we had better not push this character aside.

Let me give you a little background to the main part of this story we will look at today. Of course the main character is Balaam. He was a Midianite. The Midianites descended from Abraham by Keturah, whom he married after Sarah died (Gen. 25:1-2). It seems evident that Balaam was a prophet with an international reputation. After all, he lived a good distance away from King Balak, & yet Balak knew about him. Being a descendant of Abraham, I believe that Balaam believed in the one true God. Notice his knowledge of the covenant-name of God in vv.13, 18, etc. He knew about God. But just because a person knows *about* God does not mean that he truly believes in Him, or that he follows the ways of God. As James said, a person may profess faith in God, but without works, without obedience, their faith is dead.

Another main character was Balak. He was king of the Moabites, who were distant relatives of the Midianites & the Israelites. At this time the children of Israel were encamped in the plains of Moab near Jordan. They had defeated the Amorites who had previously showed themselves stronger than the Moabites. The Israelite had defeated Og, king of Bashan. Now, Israel was at the border of Moab, & the king of Moab was wondering what he should do to get Israel out of the land. Yet in vv.4-6 we see that Balaak did not have any confidence in his ability to overcome them militarily. He was downright afraid of Israel. So he decided to engage the services of Balaam, who evidently had developed a reputation for pronouncing effective blessings and curses. He was hoping, as we see at the end of v.6 that Balaam would be able to bring some curse upon the people of Israel, and then he could defeat them, or drive them away. So he sent a delegation to encourage Balaam to come, & curse Israel.

In our last message the thrust of the message was to avoid the mistakes that Moses, Aaron, & the children of Israel did. Likewise, Balaam is a bad example to avoid. So we will consider together some of the sins and errors of Balaam. The main sin that we will see is that he sought ways to get around God's will, instead of just doing God's will.

Have you had a time in your life when you knew God's will, but didn't want to do God's will? Did you try to find a way to avoid doing God's will? That was certainly the case with Balaam, and let's see what we can learn from this story.

Notice the first lesson we see here:

I. AT TIMES GOD CLEARLY REVEALS HIS WILL

It is a very interesting thing that God did communicate with Balaam. In the night God comes to him, probably in a dream. In v.12 we see that God clearly charges him not to go with the men Balak sent, nor attempt to curse Israel. The reason is given in the last of v.12, “for they are blessed.” God could not have been clearer in revealing His will. What king Balak was asking was contrary to God’s will, which was to bless Israel. So initially Balaam seems to have done what he should have done in this situation. V.13 says, “So Balaam rose in the morning and said to the princes of Balak, ‘Go back to your land, for the LORD has refused to give me permission to go with you.’” Since God’s will was so clear, he should have never again had anything to do with the representatives of King Balak.

Now if this were the end of the story, then I would have to assume that he was a sincere and honest man of God. But he was not faithful in returning *all* of God’s answer to the messengers. He only tells them, “the LORD has refused to give me permission to go with you.” He left out that important detail that Israel is blessed, & it would be impossible to curse them. That would have closed the door to this issue more completely. But Balaam doesn’t do that. I think he wanted to go with these men. After all, they were representatives of a king. He had the opportunity to stand before a king. What an honor! He probably knew of the diviner’s fee that they had in their hand, and more could come. That is probably why he did not close the door completely.

I cannot support many of the policies of President Obama. But if I were to receive an invitation to offer a prayer at a White House dinner, I would have to say that the invitation would be appealing. What an honor to be with the president, & heads of state! I would want to pray about it. But suppose at the bottom of the invitation it stated that I would not be permitted to pray in Jesus’ name. Well, that would settle it for me. The invitation would have to be refused. Case closed!

What are you to do when God’s will is clearly revealed to you? Let’s say there is a clear & explicit command in the Scriptures that you are to do something, or not do something. You don’t need to pray about it. You just need to trust God to help you stand firm, and simply obey God, no matter what your personal desires are, or the desires of others.

A second key truth from our story is this:

II. AT TIMES WE ARE TEMPTED TO CIRCUMVENT GOD’S WILL

There will always be times in our lives when we will say “no” to a temptation, but the old devil does not take “no” for an answer. He comes back with more & stronger temptations. We see that exemplified in our story today. We have already noted the first temptation. Notice in v.7 that the messengers brought with them the “diviner’s fee.”¹ Balaak believed that Balaam practiced divination. He believed that he was a sorcerer, who could manipulate the spiritual powers of the universe. So Balak offers a very handsome price to this man through his messengers. No doubt he was also tempted by the honor he would have received.

After Balaam refused to go with them we see the king’s second offer. He was persistent. He didn’t want to take “no” for an answer. So in vv.15-17 we read, “Then Balak again sent

¹ The translation “fee” is not explicit in the Hebrew, but is implicit. Normally this Hebrew word simply refers to the practice of divination.

princes, more numerous and more honorable than they. And they came to Balaam and said to him, ‘Thus says Balak the son of Zippor: “Please let nothing hinder you from coming to me; for I will certainly honor you greatly, and I will do whatever you say to me. Therefore please come, curse this people for me.”’” Now he explicitly tempted him with honors. So he laid a bait, not only for his covetousness, but also for his pride and ambition. He sent more messengers this time, and they were more honorable (v.15). This time he sent cabinet level officials. Furthermore, he tried to convey the urgency of his request. “Please let nothing hinder you from coming to me” (v. 16), no, not God, nor conscience, nor fear of sin or shame. The king even said in v.17, “I will do whatever you say to me.” In other words, “Just name your price.” He thought every man has his price. He was offering Balaam a “blank check,” to fill in any amount he wishes for his "honorarium." On top of that he was offering him great honor. He said, “I will certainly honor you greatly...” (v.17). What he offered was very enticing.

What would it take to get you to go against the will of God? What is your price? What would the devil have to offer you? Some people sell themselves out for very little!

Notice Balaam’s initial response. He says in v.18, “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the word of the LORD my God, to do less or more.” Well, they had upped the price but that does not seem to affect this man Balaam. He turns it down. He sounds very pious here. But then again, why did he speak of a house filled with silver and gold? He said it because he was thinking about. That certainly left the door open for further temptation. So that leads to my last point:

III. GUARD AGAINST BEING DRAWN AWAY BY TEMPTATION

That’s what happened to Balaam. Even though the Lord was explicit in His instructions, notice that Balaam does not send the second group of messengers away. Instead, we read in v.19, “Now therefore, please, you also stay here tonight, that I may know what more the LORD will say to me.” Balaam is like a child who doesn’t want to take “no” for an answer. So He wants to “pray about it” more, and see if the Lord will change His mind, and permit him to go & do what the king asks of him. Yet why would Balaam think the Lord might change His mind?

This is what Scripture calls the way of Balaam. Speaking of false prophets, Peter wrote in 2 Pet. 2:15, “They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness.” Here we see why Balaam was hoping God would permit him to go on this mission. He really wanted what the king was offering. So the way of Balaam was covetousness. Greed is a major avenue of temptation for many people.

We may here discern in Balaam a struggle between his convictions and his corruptions. His convictions charged him to adhere to the command of God, and he spoke their language (v.18). His corruptions at the same time strongly inclined him to go contrary to the command. He expressed no abhorrence of the fact that a king was offering money for his religious services.

How different he was from Jesus Christ. When the devil offered the kingdoms of the world in exchange for going against the clear will of God, Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan.” And when Simon Magus offered Simon Peter money for the ability to impart the Holy Spirit, Peter said: “Your money perish with you.” But it appears that he had a strong inclination to

accept the offer. So since Balaam left the door open, & we can see how he was drawn away by temptation.

Now learning from his bad example, there are several steps we should take to avoid being drawn into temptation & going the way of Balaam. First:

A. Don't Seek a Different Will of God – Again, he says in v.19, “Now therefore, please, you also stay here tonight, that I may know what more the LORD will say to me.” Oh, oh, what is happening here, friends? Well, it's quite obvious. He already has an answer from God. He has no need to wait another night for a further answer from God. God had already told him not to go, but you see, this man is hoping that the Lord will open a little crack in the door so he can put his foot into it.

Do we sometimes do the same thing? Does God's will sometimes seem to interfere with what you want to do? In such cases, do you seek to find some avenue to do what you want to do, rather than God's will? For example, I've known of some Christians who have been in very difficult marriages. They have reached a point where they want out. Yet God has made His will clear about divorce. So some have made all kinds of attempts to justify leaving their spouse, such as “God wants me to be happy. I am not happy in my marriage, so it must be His will that I divorce.” That whole line of reasoning is flawed, starting with the premise. At other times we hardly even seek to know God's will in the situation we are facing.

J. Vernon McGee tells the classic story of a preacher who came home and told his wife one day, “Honey, I just had a call to the church over in the next town. Now you know it's a bigger town, richer town, bigger church, more members, and fine folk over there. I've been called to go over there as pastor and I'm going upstairs to pray about it and find out what the Lord's will is for us.” She answered, “I'll go upstairs to pray with you.” “Oh no,” he said, “You stay down here and pack!” He had made up his mind, as you can see. Balaam had made up his mind also. (McGee, p. 509).

Listen, you don't even need to pray for guidance if the Lord has already made His will explicitly clear. You just need to obey God, and close the door to temptation. The Bible says, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).

B. Don't Settle for the Permissive Will of God – In v.20 we read, “And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, ‘If the men come to call you, rise and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you—that you shall do.’” Of course God knew Balaam's heart. He knew he wanted to go with these men. So sometimes God will permit us to do *our* will to teach us a lesson, and to accomplish His purposes. So God is saying here, “All right, I know you want to go with these men, but if you go, you are to say what I want you to say. Be careful of that.” We have here what is known as the permissive will of God. God gave him up to his own heart's lust.

Back in Numbers 11 we saw an example of God's permissive will. Israel was not content with the manna God was providing them. They demanded meat. So God gave them meat, and they ate so much meat that they became sick of it. Furthermore, the Scripture says He also “sent leanness to their souls.” Psa. 81:11-12 says, “But my people would not hearken to my voice.... So I gave them up unto their own hearts' lust....” They would have been better off following the perfect will of God.

Parents sometime have a permissive will. Have you noticed that? Our children will come to us & ask for something, or ask to do something, & we say “No.” We know what is best

for them, and we feel what they are asking is not best for them. But then they come back & beg & plead. They paint a picture of how terrible life will be for them if they don't get what they want. Sometimes parents give in & give them what they want. We may even say, "Go ahead. Learn the hard way." Later our children will realize they should have accepted their parents' perfect will.

Even so, God will permit us to do something or have something that we may learn the hard way. But we are always better off doing God's perfect will to begin with. After all, Romans 12:2 says that God's will is "good, and acceptable, and perfect." When the Lord has clearly revealed His will to us, our role is to accept and follow it. We don't need to pray about it, or seek a second opinion.

The final lesson is this:

C. Don't Go Down the Path of Disobedience to God's Perfect Will – In v.21 we read, "So Balaam rose in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the princes of Moab." He wastes no time lest the Lord should withdraw permission. Yet we read something that may be surprising. In v.22 we read, "Then God's anger was aroused because he went...." You say, "But wait! Didn't God say he could go with them?" Yes, but only in a permissive sense. The sin of sinners is not to be thought the less provoking to God because he permits it. One reason God became angry with Balaam is this: Nothing is more displeasing to God than malicious designs against his people; he that touches them touches the apple of his eye.

Next we see what will happen if you go down the path of God's permissive will. First:

1. God Will Seek to Correct You – He does so in Balaam's case in two ways. First, He sends an angel to deter him. For example, in the middle of v.22 we read, "and the Angel of the LORD took His stand in the way as an adversary against him...." In v.23 we see that the angel stood there "with His drawn sword in His hand." When that didn't stop Balaam, the angel appeared 2 other times to try to stop Balaam. The problem is, Balaam did not see the angel until the Lord opened his eyes in v.31.

Well, the Bible says that angels are ministering spirits, and we can see them only if they manifest themselves to us. So since Balaam was blind to the angel's presence, God helps him out. He enables his donkey to see the angel! It may be surprising that the donkey he rode on saw more than he did, his eyes being blinded with covetousness and ambition. She turned aside out of the way to avoid the angel with the sword in his hand (v.23). Balaam should have taken the hint of this, and considered whether he was out of God's will; but, instead of this, he beat her into the way again.

On the second appearance of the angel, we read in v.25, "when the donkey saw the Angel of the LORD, she pushed herself against the wall and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall." Balaam got hurt when he stepped out of God's will. He could have even been killed had his donkey not saved him! Then, when the angel appeared the third time, we read in v.27 that the donkey "lay down under Balaam." Can't you just picture the donkey stubbornly refusing to go a step further; just laying down under Balaam?

Here's an important lesson to remember. If you are going down the wrong path, don't be surprised if you face trouble & hindrances along the way. Don't be surprised if you get hurt along the way. God is trying to tell you something. God is trying to get you back to His perfect will. And when that happens, don't stubbornly ignore what God is trying to tell you. Don't ignore the ways God is trying to convict you of sin. And don't get mad at the instrument God is

using. Just get right with God! Give heed to the signs of God's conviction. Respond with repentance & obedience.

If you do not heed God's correction, notice what can happen next:

2. God May Get Your Attention - Balaam was more stubborn than his donkey, and God had to get his attention some other way. So God does a miracle here. V.28 says, "Then 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?'" The donkey spoke again in v.30. Now it's not so amazing that Balaam talked to his donkey in v.29. I talk to my dog all the time, & I've seen some of you talk to *your* pet! What's amazing is the fact that the donkey talks to Balaam! Before there was a Mr. Ed, there was a talking donkey! Furthermore, the donkey sounds more reasonable than Balaam! Yet I have no problem believing that God was able to make a donkey talk intelligently. Nothing is too hard for God (Gen. 18:14; Jer. 32:17, 27; Luke 1:37). You & I should remember that.

There may have been another reason why God used a donkey to speak to Balaam, & get his attention. Balaam viewed himself as a prophet of God, claiming that he would only speak what God revealed to him. Yet as a diviner, he probably was used to using secret methods of discerning & obtaining God's message. He probably was proud of his prophetic accomplishments. Yet three times Balaam's donkey sees what the "seer" does not. God was showing that He can use a lowly donkey to discern his will & deliver his message if He wants to. We preachers need to keep that in mind. Why, Jesus even said that He could make the stones to cry out in praise of Him (Luke 19:40; cf. Matt. 3:9; Luke 3:8)

God has His ways of speaking to us. He may speak to us through a child, or a friend, or through a preacher!

Next, God got Balaam's attention another way. God opened Balaam's eyes & he saw the angel (v.31). This time, God got through to Balaam, and Balaam fell flat upon his face. God has many ways of breaking and bringing down the hard and unhumbled heart. Balaam then seemed to relent. He said in v.34, "I have sinned, for I did not know You stood in the way against me. Now therefore, if it displeases You, I will turn back." He finally realizes that he should have taken God's first "no" as the final answer. Yet he is still not fully acknowledging the depths of his sin. Notice he says, "if it displeases You." Is there any doubt that the Lord is displeased? It takes a lot of nerve for Balaam to say "if"! In spite of all that has happened, it seems evident that he has not given up on the possibility of going to Moab. If Balaam had unconditionally surrendered to the Lord, as Saul of Tarsus did, he would have insisted on returning home at once. Instead, with his eye on the prize of wealth & honor, he gladly continued on his journey as soon as the angel gave his permission in v.35.

There is a story about a rabbi who illustrated the problem Balaam had. A rich but miserly member of his congregation had stubbornly refused making a contribution to the temple building fund. So the rabbi called the man into his study, took him to the window, and asked him what he saw. "People," answered the rich man. Then the rabbi led him to a mirror. "Now what do you see?" "Myself." The rabbi said, "The window is glass and the mirror is glass. But the glass in the mirror is covered with a little silver, and no sooner is a little silver added than you cease to see others and see only yourself."²

Balaam still hadn't fully learned his lesson. He still had his eye on the silver. So God let him go, for He was about to make him look like a fool before the king. Yet God also permitted him to continue to accomplish another purpose in this situation. God would prevent the king's

² A. S. Kramer, *Three Rabbis in a Rowboat: The World's Best Jewish Humor* (New York: Citadel Press, 1996), 29.

desire from being realized. If you read on into chapter 23, you will see that God used Balaam to bless Israel rather than curse them.

Sources: Roy Gane, *The NIV Application Commentary: Leviticus, Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), originally published by 1721; Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1981); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:10] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2011). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).