

Curses? Foiled Again!

“God said to Balaam, ‘You will not go with them. You will not curse the people because they are blessed’” (Num. 22:12). Obviously, our enemy wants to curse us, but God intends to bless us! Balaam learned the hard way that you can’t curse what God has blessed. It will roll off like water off a duck’s back.

When Balak, the King of Moab, heard how the Israelites defeated the Amorites, he feared he was next on their hit list. So he hired Balaam, a soothsayer from Pethor in Mesopotamia, to come and curse them. Pethor was a hotbed of oriental magic, a region famous for soothsayers. Balaam was later slain for his corruption and his ties to the Midianites, enemies of Israel (Num. 31:8, 16, Josh. 13:22).

Balaam was a curious mixture of good and evil, part sheep and part wolf. Herbert Lockyer wrote, “Balaam had a head full of light but a heart that was dark, and great was the darkness.” Another commentator suggests, “As Judas was among the apostles, so Balaam was among the prophets, a true seer but a bad man.” In short, he was a false prophet whom God strangely used to prophesy some amazingly true things about Israel.

Three times Balak promised Balaam gold and glory in exchange for cursing Israel, but each time God gave him remarkable words of blessing over them instead. Initially, God told him not to go, but greedy Balaam stubbornly persisted. If you don’t think there is comedy in the Bible, read the account of Balaam’s talking donkey—or as I call it, the fool and his mule. When his donkey saw an angel with a drawn sword blocking the path, she went berserk and crushed Balaam’s foot against a wall. Terror-stricken, she eventually sat down and wouldn’t budge. Balaam beat her with his staff until he saw the angel too, then he fell on his face in repentance.

Incredibly, God used this crooked psychic to pronounce several lofty prophecies. For instance, he predicted Israel would rise up like an invincible, young lion (Num. 23:24). As long as Israel was true to their covenant with God, they were unbeatable. No enemy could stand against them and win. This prophecy, while spoken over Israel, can apply to us as well. As long as we remain faithful to God, “No weapon formed against [us] can prosper” (Is. 54:17). “If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31). God has called the righteous to be as “bold as a lion” and to imitate the lion-like nature of Christ—the Lion of the tribe of Judah.

Balaam further said of Israel, “He crouches, he lies down as a lion, and as a lion, who will stir him up? Blessed is he who blesses you, and cursed is he who curses you” (Num. 24:9). You’ve heard the slogan, “Don’t mess with Texas!” Balaam was warning the enemy, “Don’t mess with Israel. If you pick a fight with God’s people, you’re picking a fight with God—a fight you will lose.” Balaam even went on to predict the coming of the Messiah, “a star will come out of Jacob, and a scepter will rise out of Israel” (Num. 24:17). Every time he opened his mouth to pronounce a curse, God reversed it, and it came out a blessing.

Unable to curse Israel, Balaam tried another strategy as his dark side reared its ugly head. The Moabites were known as “the people of Chemosh,” a pagan idol to which child sacrifice was offered. They used perverse sexual practices in their worship. So Balaam counseled Balak to entice the Israelites into immorality and idolatry, knowing this behavior would grieve God and cause them to bring a curse on themselves (Num. 25:1-3; 31:16). Incidentally, Balaam’s name means “devourer or destroyer of the people”—a fitting description of this devious man’s deeds.

For those who think Balaam and his animated donkey is just an ancient fable, notice he is mentioned as a literal person three times in the New Testament by three different authors,

all of whom condemned his actions:

1. Peter called him a false teacher by saying, "They have forsaken the right way and have gone astray. They follow *the way of Balaam* the son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness, but who was rebuked for his iniquity. The mute donkey speaking with a man's voice constrained the madness of the prophet" (2 Pet. 2:15-16, emphasis added).

2. Jude compared him to backsliders who "run greedily after *the error of Balaam* for a reward" (Jude 11, emphasis added).

3. John considered him a corrupter of Israel, similar to false leaders in the church at Pergamos, "You have there those who hold *the teaching of Balaam*, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit sexual immorality" (Rev. 2:14, emphasis added).

If you re-read the timeworn tale of Balaam in Numbers 22-25, you'll learn several valuable lessons: First, while the enemy wants to curse you, God wants to bless you. Second, be careful about whom you allow to influence you. A soothsayer and immoral people lured Israel into sin. Third, don't be motivated by greed. The love of money led Balaam into all sorts of bad behavior. Fourth, even a donkey knows that you can't curse what God has blessed. What the enemy intends as a curse against you, God can and will reverse it and turn it into a blessing!

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