

## Avoiding Balaam

- So, let's open with prayer as we prepare to go into God's word...
- Today we will be studying in the book of Numbers,
- Open your Bible to Numbers 22...

[Num. 22:1](#) ¶ Then the sons of Israel journeyed, and camped in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan *opposite* Jericho.

[Num. 22:2](#) ¶ Now Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites.

[Num. 22:3](#) So Moab was in great fear because of the people, for they were numerous; and Moab was in dread of the sons of Israel.

[Num. 22:4](#) Moab 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.

[Num. 22:5](#) So 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.

[Num. 22:6](#) "Now, 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."

- Let me set the scene for you a bit,
  - The book of Numbers covers the entire 40 years of Israel's wanderings in the desert, but by Chapter 22 we are nearing the end of that period
  - Israel by this time is a huge nation of people, probably 2 million people or more
  - And as they wander through the wilderness following after God and Moses, they are an imposing force to be reckoned with
    - They have already developed a fierce reputation within the land of Canaan as being undefeatable as a result of God granting them victory and victory over the peoples in the land
- Here in Chapter 22, the nation of Israel has come into a region of Moab near Jericho

- Moab is the land on the immediate east of the Dead Sea, present day Jordan
- Jericho sits right across the Jordan river immediately to the north of the Dead Sea – about 20 away
- And the Moabites are terribly afraid that the Israelites would overrun them and defeat them
  - You can get a sense of how large the Israelite nation by looking at verse 5 – they can be seen 20 miles away (cover the surface of the land)
- So the King of Moab, Balak, decides to call in help
  - He sends messengers to a local prophet called Balaam to come curse the people
- Now this Balaam character is a curious fellow
  - From the testimony of the king, it's apparent that he has a reputation for the power to bring blessing and cursing, as if speaking on behalf of God
  - And when we read a little farther, we get the impression that he has become accustomed to conversing with the Lord
  - Look at the next series of verses

[Num. 22:7](#) ¶ So 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.

[Num. 22:8](#) He 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.

[Num. 22:9](#) Then God came to Balaam and said, "Who are these men with you?"

[Num. 22:10](#) Balaam said to God, "Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent *word* to me,

[Num. 22:11](#) 'Behold, 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.'"

[Num. 22:12](#) God said to Balaam, "Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed."

[Num. 22:13](#) So 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."

- There are several details we need to consider in these verses

- First, when the elders of Moab arrive to see Balaam, they come with “fees of divination”
  - The first thing to understand was that it was not uncommon for prophets to receive payment from those grateful to receive their ministry
  - Balaam was obviously no different – except that as this story plays out, we’re going to see how much the money mattered to him
- More importantly, scripture says these were fees for divination
  - So it raises the question of whether Balaam was a true prophet or not
  - In fact, in Joshua 13:22 calls Balaam a diviner, or sorcerer
  - So many assume that Balaam’s power was Satanic and not from God
  - But before we rush to any conclusions about Balaam’s character, let’s continue to examine the story
- In verse 8, Balaam says he must check with the Lord before deciding what to do
  - The word for LORD here is the personal name of God – Yahweh
    - Balaam says he can’t know whether he will have the power to curse these people without first checking with the true God
    - So although Balaam is accused of using divination, it also appears that he was used by God as a prophet...we’ll understand more about Balaam as we continue to move forward
- Before we move on, though, what impression do you think the messengers had of the prophet at this point?
  - I imagine they thought he seemed very holy and pious – unwilling to accept their request and take their payment until he had the opportunity to consult with the Lord –
  - they must have been impressed with his godliness, don’t you think?
- That night, the Lord comes to Balaam and asks a question – Who are these men?
  - Why does God ask this question? Does He not know who these men are?

- Of course He does – so it begs the question – What was God’s purpose in asking a question He already knew the answer to?
  - God is trying to get Balaam thinking a little bit about his situation – just as the Lord does with us from time to time
    - Prompting us to consider our own situation before stepping in to direct us or correct us
    - [kid examples?]
- In verse 12 the Lord tells Balaam he can’t go because God is not going to allow these people to be cursed
  - Balaam seems to go along with this answer, but look closely at how Balaam relays that answer to the messengers
  - He says, “God won’t let me go with you.”
    - How does that response strike you?
    - For me, it sounds a bit like when a buddy asks if I can come over and watch the game
    - Now I know my wife has told me I need to do some chores around the house
      - So, I tell my friends, I would love to but, my wife won’t let me go.
      - It puts the blame on my wife and implies that if it were up to me, I would be willing to do it
  - In other words, there was no true obedience in Balaam's heart to follow God at this point
    - In fact, he’s looking for some way to get around the restriction – practically inviting the messengers to sweeten the deal somehow – to make it worth his while to ignore God
    - And they take him up on the offer

[Num. 22:14](#) The leaders of Moab arose and went to Balak and said, “Balaam refused to come with us.”

[Num. 22:15](#) ¶ Then Balak again sent leaders, more numerous and more distinguished than the former.

[Num. 22:16](#) They 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;

[Num. 22:17](#) for I will indeed honor you richly, and I will do whatever you say to me. Please come then, curse this people for me.’”

[Num. 22:18](#) Balaam 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.

[Num. 22:19](#) “Now please, you also stay here tonight, and I will find out what else the LORD will speak to me.”

[Num. 22:20](#) God 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.” So the messengers go back to the king and tell him the result, which naturally only encourages the king to send an even greater reward to tempt Balaam

- When King sends the messengers back, as we knew they would, there are more of them. They are more distinguished and they bring even more gold and silver to entice Balaam
  - Now look at Balaam’s response
    - Does he say, I already heard from God on this point, and there’s no point considering your offer because God never changes his mind

[1Sam. 15:29](#) “Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or **change** His mind; for He is not a man that He should **change** His mind.”

- No, Balaam essentially says, let’s see what God will say this time – since I didn’t get the answer I wanted the first time, let’s ask again
- I don’t tell me we all haven’t done this same thing ourselves
- Praying to God isn’t especially spiritual
  - Many people from many religions pray to their gods everyday – praying isn’t spiritual
  - Balaam’s prayers certainly look spiritual
  - His words of waiting on the Lord certainly sound very godly
    - But Obeying God when He answers you directly – that’s spiritual, that’s godly

- Godliness is not measured by your willingness to seek God's will – it's measured by your willingness to obeying God's will
- So does God say when we ask Him a second (or third or fourth) time for something He's already said no about?
  - If you are assuming that God will just keep saying no, well...He might
  - But He might also say yes, - not because you succeeded in changing His mind – but so that He can demonstrate the error of your thinking by allowing you suffer the consequences of getting what you want
    - And He'll do it in such a way that He still brings glory to Himself while preserving His plan – and that's what happens to Balaam
- Balaam went and prayed again for the thing God had already answered no about
  - But God can see that Balaam's heart is not to obey, but rather to look for a way to get around God's prohibition
  - So God says, OK Balaam, you can go, but you're going to say what I want you to say
  - So gleefully, like a child getting his own way, Balaam rises in the morning and goes with the messengers

[Num. 22:21](#) ¶ So Balaam arose in the morning, and saddled his donkey and went with the leaders of Moab.

[Num. 22:22](#) But 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.

[Num. 22:23](#) When 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.

[Num. 22:24](#) Then 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.

[Num. 22:25](#) When 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.

[Num. 22:26](#) The 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.

[Num. 22:27](#) When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam; so Balaam was angry and struck the donkey with his stick.

[Num. 22:28](#) And 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?"

[Num. 22:29](#) Then 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.”

- I can't help but laugh a little here
  - Part of the reason I want to laugh is because I feel like I'm looking at myself in a mirror
  - How often are we stubbornly determined to go forward with our plan despite God's clear direction to otherwise
    - And then when the plan encounters difficulties – difficulties that God Himself has placed in our path specifically to show us the error of our ways
    - We don't wake up to our error, we don't repent, we don't get the point
    - No, instead we lash out at those around us – especially at those who are actually willing to see the Lord's will and obey it and tell us about it
- In verse 22, we see that though God allowed Balaam to leave but He is not happy about it
  - He's angry at Balaam for going – and we can clearly see now that God wasn't allowing Balaam to go because God changed His mind
  - Rather, God in His grace and mercy is giving Balaam another opportunity to see the error of his thinking
- He places His angel in Balaam's path to stop his progress – perhaps so that Balaam might sense something was wrong and come to his senses and repent
  - As the text makes clear, the donkey can see the angel but Balaam doesn't
  - The donkey, who is clearly no dummy, doesn't want to advance toward this menacing angel
  - But Balaam doesn't stop to wonder why has this donkey stopped moving forward?
    - His loyal donkey who has always done what he was told has suddenly started acting in a completely uncharacteristic fashion

- And instead than stopping to consider his circumstances and asking what does it all mean – Balaam just starts beating his only friend
- Do you see what’s going on here?
  - God is trying to speak to Balaam in any way He can – even by using Balaam’s trusted companion, the donkey
    - First God communicates through the donkey’s actions, and then finally God takes the extreme step of literally speaking supernaturally through the mouth of the donkey
    - My wife is always quick to remind me that since God prefers to speak truth through the mouth of an donkey, I shouldn’t think to highly of myself
  - God does this to us all the time
    - When we’re disobediently trying to work our own plan, God will keep trying to get our attention-
      - First through our circumstances, by making things difficult if not impossible as we stubbornly forge ahead in our own plans
      - Then if that doesn’t work, he’ll bring a word from our brothers and sisters in the faith or perhaps a spouse or close friend –
    - And if we ignore these signs, so often the conviction of the Holy Spirit causes us to attack those God has sent to help?
      - We attack our friends and tell them to but out
      - We fight with our spouse and tell them they aren’t being supportive
      - Yet all the while, these friends and messengers might be our last chance to avoid the misery of our decisions

[Num. 22:31](#) ¶ Then 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.

[Num. 22:32](#) The 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.



[Num. 22:33](#) “But 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.”

- By his stubborn disobedience, Balaam had set himself up as God’s adversary
  - The angel tells Balaam that his friend, who he’s beating, was doing the right thing and saved his life
  - What the angels says to Balaam should cause us to think a little
    - God is not beyond taking our opportunities to serve, our ministry itself or even our very lives in this world if necessary to make His point concerning obedience
    - He doesn’t owe us anything beyond what He has appointed
- Now Balaam appears to have a moment of regret...

[Num. 22:34](#) Balaam 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.”

- Balaam...you don’t just get it do you?
  - You have a fierce angel standing before you with a sword
  - You have God speaking to you through the mouth of your donkey – something that doesn’t even seem to faze him
    - You know, if God ever chooses to speak to me from the mouth of my dog, I’m here to tell you that I’m probably not going to carry on a casual conversation – nevermind that dog is going to be eating steak the rest of his life
- But Is this repentance? No! Balaam asks again if it’s OK to go curse Israel?
  - [Bang Head]
  - And in the next verse you see God allow him to continue once again – God will use Balaam’s stubbornness for his own purposes while frustrating Balaam in the meantime

- And if you know the rest of the story, Balaam eventually tries to curse the nation of Israel – despite God’s direction not to do so
- And every time he opens his mouth, God replaces his words with a blessing
- He tries several times, desperately trying to please Balak and hoping that God will go along,
- What you may not have know was that stubborn Balaam found a way in the end to satisfy Balak and get his payoff he wanted so desperately (for the sake of time, I will summarize)
  - At the end of the story in Num 24:14, a scared Balaam offers secret advice to the frustrated Balak
    - Though Chapter 24 doesn’t tell us what the advice is, we learn later in scripture
    - First, in Num 31, we learn that the counsel of Balaam was responsible for the fall of many men of Israel
- Then in Rev 2:14 we learn what the counsel was:

[Rev. 2:14](#) ‘But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit *acts of* immorality.

- Balaam taught Balak to send Moabite woman into the camp to corrupt the nation of Israel in the hope of weakening them
- Why do think Balaam was so intent on bringing down God’s people?
  - In a word: greed
    - Balaam wasn’t truly interested in serving God or His people
    - He was only interested in serving his own interests

[2Pet. 2:15](#) forsaking the right way, they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the *son* of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness;  
[2Pet. 2:16](#) but he received a rebuke for his own transgression, *for* a mute donkey, speaking with a voice of a man, restrained the madness of the prophet.

- As a prophet, Balaam was a man appointed to serve God’s people, whoever they were and wherever they were
  - But rather than seek God’s will and serve Him, Balaam made every decision based on what was best for himself
- In Luke 22, Jesus gives us the fundamental rule for how leaders in the church are supposed to be view their responsibility to lead God’s people
- Turn with me briefly as we conclude our teaching today in Luke 22:

[Luke 22:24](#) ¶ And there arose also a dispute among them *as to* which one of them was regarded to be greatest.

[Luke 22:25](#) And He said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called ‘Benefactors.’

[Luke 22:26](#) “But *it is* not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant.

[Luke 22:27](#) “For who is greater, the one who reclines *at the table* or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines *at the table*? But I am among you as the one who serves.

- This is certainly not one the apostles’ finer moments
  - In Jesus’ very midst, the disciples begin to argue – to dispute with one another – over who would be the greatest
  - Now lets understand one thing – the argument wasn’t over who would be the most effective minister or who would have the greatest success in ministry or who would leave the greatest legacy or who would do the most to help God’s people
    - The word for greatest here in the Greek is *megas* – as in biggest, most important, who will have the distinction of being the #1 apostle - the leader, in other words, of the group
- What’s even more shocking than the dispute itself is the moment they chose to have this conversation – Jesus just said one of the tem would betray Him
  - How did they make that transition?
- Can you imagine how utterly disappointed and saddened Jesus was by observing this display – among the very men who would very soon be called upon to lead the fledgling church
- In His disgust, He turns to them and says:

- You know, the Gentiles have kings too – leaders who lord it over them
  - Here's hint for you future study: you can always tell when Jesus is trying to really hammer the disciples an especially strong criticism, because he will compare them to Gentiles
- The Gentile was the lowest of low to a Jew – the dogs of society – completely without worth
  - So Gentiles have leaders too – there's nothing special about being a leader – there are plenty of ways you can be a leader if that's your goal
- When Gentiles rule, they lord over their people – act like a master, as if the people exist to serve them
  - These leaders use their position of leadership to gain something for themselves at the expense of those they rule over
  - And everyone of those disciples knew exactly what Jesus was talking about, because they had all grown up in a Jewish culture that was under the constant oppression of the Gentile Roman empire
- Then Jesus adds in verse 25 that a Gentile ruler adds insult to injury by portraying himself as the people's benefactor, their provider, the one who supports the people
  - The word benefactor is e-ur-u-geges – it means simply doer of good
  - The ruler sees himself as the doer of good for having given back some small piece of what he took in the first place
  - Today, we use a different word to describe being lorded over, having everything taken away, all our wealth and liberty stripped, and then seeing a little given back to makes us feel thankful.....
  - Today we call that The IRS
- Then in verse 26, Jesus says that leadership in His church must look different than it does in the world
  - The one who is greatest is the one who serves to rest – Matthew uses the world slave (doulos) to describe a leader
- The world's model of leadership – where those in charge aim to benefit in some way from their leadership position – is the wrong model for leaders in the church

- The one who wishes to be greatest – to lead the church - must be the one who aspires to the lowest stature – to give himself up, to deny himself – and serve others with no expectation of reward or even thanks – like a slave
  - A man ready to assume roles that result in others in the fellowship being lifted up – rather than himself
    - Personally, I have always thought that if we give a pastor a reserved parking spot, it ought to be the spot farthest from the church entrance
  - A leader should be someone willing to make personal sacrifices of his time and wealth to ensure that the church’s resources are used first and always to further the work of God in the body of Christ
- The trend today, however, seems to be for churches to model themselves after businesses
  - We have marketing plans,
  - We develop corporate branding
  - We hire fundraising consultants to ensure high giving
  - We pay for demographic studies to determine where to plant our next church to ensure the fastest growth
  - We teach our pastor to adopt Harvard business school leadership principles – to become experts in business trends and business thinking
- Now, none of these things are wrong in and of themselves, as long as we are confident that God has directed us to do these things
  - But when they become the church’s principle tools for moving the kingdom forward, rather than relying on God’s word and His will,
  - Then we’ve stopped being the church and we’re just another business – we’re no longer salt and light
- And when we run our churches like businesses, is it any surprise that so often the men we have leading them turn out to act more like CEOs than pastors
  - Seeking after personal reward, prestige and honor for themselves rather than for God

- Remember, Christ is the CEO of His church and He's not looking for help – He doesn't need a CEO
  - He doesn't need slick marketing, He doesn't need fancy new business leadership principles, He doesn't need seeker-friendly programs
  - He personally appeared to the most vehement Christian hater of His day and called that man to a life of extraordinary faith and service without the help of a single person –
  - Christ turning Saul into the Apostle Paul
    - If he can do that without a church or a program or even an evangelist, then He doesn't need our help to build his church
    - But He desires to work through us for our own benefit
- This church is on the verge of embarking on a critically important task to select your next pastor
- And I believe the Lord has brought me here today to deliver a simple message that might direct you in your search
  - Look for a man who's heart is to obey the Lord: a man who hears God's commands, takes them to heart and teach others to obey as well
  - Look for a man who knows God's Word, and follows it, and who makes proclaiming it to others his first and only priority
  - Look for a man who is not motivated by a lofty position or by a big paycheck or by titles and prestige – ask each candidate if he's willing to take the job for 50% of the previous salary and judge him by his response
  - Look for a servant, a man who by his life and personal testimony known for his service to the Body of Christ – a man who knows he's not greater than his Master, who washed the feet of the disciples
- Because if you go as the world goes and, sadly, as more and more churches seem to be doing – selecting a man who is like Balaam
  - A man who serves himself, who seeks after the wealth of this world, a man who appears godly and spiritual yet all the while stubbornly ignores the leading of the Holy Spirit

- Then just as with the people of Israel, God may eventually decide to allow the man to get his way, bringing down God's people with him
- I pray better things for this fellowship, as I believe that God has declared it will be different for you
- So we can all give Him the glory he so richly deserves when He brings you the man He has called to serve his people