

Lesson 22: Numbers 22-25 Balaam Blesses God's People (Wandering, part 3)**Introduction**

Numbers: Kingdom Rebellion		
Key Passage: 14:20-23		
1:1-10:10	10:11-25:18	26-36
Preparation to enter the land	Wandering in the desert	Preparation to enter the land
Census of the first generation	Death of the first generation	Census of the second generation

The reports of grumbling in the book of Numbers end with the plague of serpents described in the first half of chapter 21. No more grumbling. But we are not quite done with the first generation. Their end is described in chapter 26 after the taking of the second census. We get this report in 26:64-65.

⁶⁴ But among these there was not a man of those who were numbered by Moses and Aaron the priest, who numbered the sons of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai. ⁶⁵ For the LORD had said of them, "They shall surely die in the wilderness." And not a man was left of them, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun.

From that last report of grumbling to this second census, that's from chapter 21 through chapter 25, the narrative is transitioning from the first generation to the second. The transition starts and ends well highlighting the faithfulness of the second generation. But in between we get the odd and intriguing story of Balaam. First let's look at how the Israelites get settled beside the Jordan river just outside the promise land. And then we will concentrate in on Balaam.

Defeat of Sihon and Og (Numbers 21:21-35)

The transition from one generation to the next starts with a major victory for the Israelites. The river Jordan is the Eastern boarder of the promise land. It runs fairly straight from North to South with a sea on either end. So, starting from the sea of Galilee in the North the river flows due South into the Dead Sea. That straight parallel line has four perpendicular lines jutting out to the East away from the promise land. These four rivers, the Zered, Arnon, Jabbok, and Yarmuk form the boundaries of the peoples who live just East of Canaan. The Zered pokes out from the bottom of the Dead Sea, marking the boundary between Edom and Moab. The Arnon juts out half way up the Dead Sea, marking the boundary between Moab and the Amorite King Sihon. Above Sihon is another Amorite King named Og. The Moabites used to have more land, but Sihon took it from them. That will be an issue later.

In Numbers 21:21 the Israelites have completed their journeys around Edom and around Moab. God forbade them to fight with those two peoples. They have crossed over the Arnon river into Amorite territory. And hey make it all the way up past the Dead Sea before being confronted by Sihon. And when he challenges them, the Israelites ask for passage through his territory to continue further up the Jordan and then cross over into the promise land. Sihon does not trust them. And in those days, it is hard to blame him. Or maybe he is tempted by the potential plunder. For whatever reason, he says, "No" and attacks. But this hardened generation of desert wanderers is no easy prey. More importantly, they have got God on their side. And they defeat Sihon and take all his territory, from the Arnon river up north to the Jabbok, which sticks out half-way up the Jordan river. The captured territory includes already established towns, and cultivated vineyards, and livestock.

The Israelites decide to keep going, and they take the next section of land as well, from the Jabbok all the way to the Yarmuk, which pokes out of the sea of Galilee. So, now they are from the Dead Sea all the way up to the Sea of Galilee. And at that point the Amorite King King Og opposes them and pays for it. They take possession of his land. In the Bible, it is the land of Bashan which extends north even further pass the Sea of Galilee. Today that land is known as the Golan Heights. With all this strategic highland to the East of the promise land now in their possession, Israel makes camp in the plains of

Moab across the Jordan from Jericho. They took this land from Sihon, but we are told that Sihon had taken it from Moab. So, Moab has a double problem with Israel. They are terrified, witnessing the fighting capabilities of this large nation that is now camped to their North. And the Israelites are camped in territory they claim as their own. And this is going to set up the intriguing Bible story, the story of Balaam's blessing or probably better known as Balaam and the donkey.

Balaam's Blessing (Numbers 22-25; 31)

We start with Balaam being humbled in Numbers 22:1-35.

Balaam humbled (22:1-35)

Afraid to engage battle with Israel, Balak the king of Moab comes up with a strategy to gain an upper edge. The strategy fits the Ancient Near Eastern worldview that battles are in reality fought by the gods, that's the most important battle, which is only mirrored on earth by men. The key is to turn a nation's god against that nation or to get the god to flee. So, Balak sends for spiritual aid to the internationally renowned Balaam, a famous prophet-diviner living far up North near the Euphrates river. The land of two rivers is one of two seats of ancient civilization in this whole region. The other is down South in Egypt. Up North, power changes hands as the centuries pass from the Empire of Ur in the time of Abraham, to the Old Assyrian and Old Babylonian Empires who both lose power only to gain it again when we have the New Assyrian and New Babylonian empires to be overthrown in turn by the Persians. But it is almost like the culture just stays the same. It passes from owner to owner, but there is this continuous Mesopotamian seat of culture that was begun thousands of years before by the Sumerians. And by the time of Moses these civilizations, they are looking back on more than 1500 years of recorded, written history. So, I don't think it is surprising that a prophet of international renown would live in the vicinity of this northern center of Ancient Near East culture.

Originally, the people between the two rivers were ethnic Sumerians. But a couple hundred years before Abraham, Amorite barbarians invaded, taking control of such venerated places as the city of Babylon and mixed in with the Sumerians, making the region bilingual. These Amorites are Semites, a linguistic designation that puts their language in the same family as Hebrew. So, Balaam was likely from a Semitic group just as Abraham before him had been.

The distance from Moab to Balaam's home would have been significant, about 725 kilometers or 450 miles. One way might take the messengers a month. Balak's messengers make the trip. Here is the first interaction between the messengers of Balak, King of Moab and the famous, probably Semitic, prophet-diviner Balaam. This is Number 22:5-14, starting with Balak telling his messengers what to say.

⁵ ... "Behold, a people came out of Egypt; behold, they cover the surface of the land, and they are living opposite me. 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." 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. 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. ⁹ Then God came to Balaam and said, "Who are these men with you?" ¹⁰ Balaam said to God, "Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent *word* to me, 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.' " ¹² God said to Balaam, "Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed." 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." ¹⁴ The leaders of Moab arose and went to Balak and said, "Balaam refused to come with us."

There is some curious stuff here. The text says that God spoke to Balaam; not a god, but God, Elohim, the unique term for God used by the Hebrews. Who is this Balaam? Is he good, is he bad? Is he like

Melchizedek, the non-Hebrew priest to whom Abraham paid tithe? Is he like the wise men who come later from up in the same region to worship Jesus? How does this guy hear from God? How does he speak with God? The text says that the elders of Moab and Midian pay him fees for divination. Well, that is not a good sign. We read ancient texts of battles which are not fought until generals' diviners see the right sign: an eagle that flies by or a telling shape in the entrails of the sacrificed lamb or something in the formation of the clouds or by casting lots. And the practice of divination was specifically forbidden in Leviticus 19:26. So, to call Balaam a diviner makes us wonder about his character. Who is this guy? But God talks to Balaam, and Balaam talks back to God. More importantly, Balaam obeys God. Balaam even uses the covenant name of God, saying, "Go back to your land, for the LORD [Yahweh] has refused to let me go with you."

This is really curious. Who is this guy? That's a great question. The story has not yet revealed much. That means we are not supposed to know much yet. We need to keep reading and see how the narrative unfolds. First, the messengers have to make the one-month trip back to Moab. When they do, Balak sends more distinguished messengers back to Balaam with a promise of more money and more honor. Numbers 22:16-22:

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; 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.' " 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. ¹⁹ Now please, you also stay here tonight, and I will find out what else the LORD will speak to me." 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." ²¹ So Balaam arose in the morning, and saddled his donkey and went with the leaders of Moab. 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.

What does verse 18 suggest about Balaam? "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." That sounds pretty faithful to God. Here Balaam calls Yahweh "my God," at the same time that he refuses to accept money contrary to his understanding of God's will. So far, so good. God then tells Balaam to go with the men. So, Balaam rises up early to go. But then God gets angry that he is going and sends an angel to oppose him. Wait a minute. God tells him to go, then God gets angry that he is going. Well, that's not fair at all. That makes no sense.

That's at least one of the typical responses I get from students when we study this text. That makes no sense. And you know what, that's right. Exactly! That makes no sense. So, what do we do with it? This is exactly the kind of passage I love to stumble across in Scripture. I have a really high view of the literary quality of the Bible. I don't think this is in here as a mistake. And I have a high view of the character of God. So, when I come to something that looks incongruent or contradictory, I sit up and pay attention. This is intentional. This is a challenge from the author to make the reader think.

It doesn't make sense. What is going on? Surprise and tension are both building blocks of a great story. And we have got both here. The text quickly turns on us. We doubted Balaam at the start when the text said he was sent a diviner's payment. What kind of pagan guy is this? But then he conversed with God. And he called Yahweh his God. And he refused payment. This sounds like a good guy, a Melchizedek kind of guy. God's anger surprises us. Especially since God just told him to go.

Once again, we face that reality of biblical interpretation that the text often does not tell us the state of a person's heart but expects us to infer the state of the heart according to the consequences that follow or according to God's interaction with the person. God's anger indicates that something is wrong with Balaam's heart. We will have to see if that plays out in the narrative. We are wise to remember that just because someone claims the name of Yahweh, that does not mean that they have submitted to covenant relationship with Yahweh. God talks to people who have not trusted in

him. And God uses whole nations that are opposed to him. There is one little hint in the text that becomes noticeable after God becomes angry. God had said to Balaam, "Go with them; but only the word which I speak to you shall you do." That is a caution. So far it seems like Balaam is okay with that. He has said that he cannot speak contrary to the command of the LORD. But what exactly does Balaam mean by that? He could mean that he is not willing to speak contrary to the LORD. "I would never, I would never say something contrary to what I think that the LORD has said." He could also literally mean that he is not able to speak contrary to the LORD. If that is the case, he is telling the Moabite elders that he is not the one in control of the outcome. He has some kind of spiritual process that he has to follow. And whether he is being sincere about that or not sincere, he is letting them know, "I am not in control of this. The LORD is in control of this."

We can only wonder about God's anger here. We can think about it. But the text does not give us the state of Balaam's heart. We have to read on and see how it goes. Here is Numbers 22:22-33.

Now he was riding on his donkey and his two servants were with him. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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?" 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." ³⁰ The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I ever been accustomed to do so to you?" And he said, "No." 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. 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. 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."

Of course, the first thing we want to know is what is going on here with the donkey speaking. Did God cause Balaam to hallucinate that the donkey was speaking, such that it was just in his mind? Did God speak for the donkey? Or did God actually give the donkey speech? We don't know. And we shouldn't let our curiosity, it's okay to have curiosity, but we shouldn't let our curiosity about the donkey distract us from the incredible irony that God has created in this story. Who is the great prophet-diviner here? Well, it's not the donkey. But who sees the spiritual reality? Who is aware of the spiritual danger? Well, it's not Balaam. The famous international diviner does not see a thing. The donkey has all the insight. The donkey speaks the truth. That's humiliating and telling.

I wonder if Moses wants us to remember what God told him at his calling by the burning bush. God kept saying he had chosen Moses, and Moses kept pushing back, "I have never been eloquent...for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue (Exodus 4:10)." Getting frustrated by this point, God rebukes Moses, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say (Exodus 3:11-12)."

Balaam receives a similar rebuke. And he seems to really receive it. It does not mean that he is fully God's man, but he is humbled, and he does repent. He seems to get something out of it.

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.” ³⁵ But the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, “Go with the men, but you shall speak only the word which I tell you.” So Balaam went along with the leaders of Balak.

Did you notice the repetition? “Go with the men, but you shall speak only the word which I tell you.” That is the same thing God told Balaam before he left, right before he got mad at him. The repetition affirms that we are dealing with some kind of heart issue. Balaam had gone, but in some sense, he was going on his own terms. And God needs to give him some kind of heart adjustment, a humbling. That’s what happens with the donkey. Now God determines that Balaam really is ready to go. Maybe now he has learned the lesson that Joseph understood about true prophecy, “It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer (Genesis 41:16).”

Balaam made to speak (22:36-24:25)

Balaam has been humbled. Now God will make him speak. When he arrives in Moab, Balak is a bit peeved that he did not come the first time he was asked. We see that in Numbers 22:36-38.

³⁶ When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, which is on the Arnon border, at the extreme end of the border. ³⁷ Then Balak said to Balaam, “Did I not urgently send to you to call you? Why did you not come to me? Am I really unable to honor you?” ³⁸ So Balaam said to Balak, “Behold, I have come now to you! Am I able to speak anything at all? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I shall speak.”

Seems like Balaam learned the lesson of the donkey. Balaam will make three attempts at a curse and then add a plus one prophecy for free. I am not going to read through all four prophecies but will hit some highlights. To establish the pattern, let’s do read the first example, both how Balak sets everything up and the words of the curse. Numbers 22:39-23:6:

³⁹ And Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-huzoth. ⁴⁰ Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and sent *some* to Balaam and the leaders who were with him. ⁴¹ Then it came about in the morning that Balak took Balaam and brought him up to the high places of Baal, and he saw from there a portion of the people. ¹ Then Balaam said to Balak, “Build seven altars for me here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me here.” ² Balak did just as Balaam had spoken, and Balak and Balaam offered up a bull and a ram on each altar. ³ Then Balaam said to Balak, “Stand beside your burnt offering, and I will go; perhaps the LORD will come to meet me, and whatever He shows me I will tell you.” So he went to a bare hill. ⁴ Now God met Balaam, and he said to Him, “I have set up the seven altars, and I have offered up a bull and a ram on each altar.” ⁵ Then the LORD put a word in Balaam’s mouth and said, “Return to Balak, and you shall speak thus.” ⁶ So he returned to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering, he and all the leaders of Moab.

They are at a Moabite town. Balak makes sacrifice for a feast for Balaam and the elders. Then Balaam goes up on a hill and hears from God. He then tells Balak to prepare a costly sacrifice of seven bulls and seven rams. Then Balaam goes up on the hill again after the sacrifice and he comes down and delivers the curse. That is Numbers 23:7-10:

“From Aram Balak has brought me,	Moab’s king from the mountains of the East,
‘Come curse Jacob for me,	And come, denounce Israel!’
⁸ “How shall I curse whom God has not cursed?	And how can I denounce whom the LORD
	has not denounced?
⁹ “As I see him from the top of the rocks,	And I look at him from the hills;
Behold, a people <i>who</i> dwells apart,	And will not be reckoned among the nations.
¹⁰ “Who can count the dust of Jacob,	Or number the fourth part of Israel?
Let me die the death of the upright,	And let my end be like his!”

Well, the curse turns out to be not much of a curse at all but more a prophecy of blessing. In the second phrase of verse 8 Balaam clearly invokes Yahweh, “How can I denounce whom Yahweh has not?” We still do not know Balaam’s exact relationship to Yahweh. We do not know whether Balaam earned his fame calling on Yahweh or whether the point was to call on the specific god of the people you are trying to curse. Is he only calling on Yahweh because he has been asked to curse Israel? Maybe that’s the way you do it. We don’t know. We just know that Balaam keeps his communication directed to Yahweh. And he is made to speak the words that God puts into his mouth. The lesson of the donkey is being played out.

Balak is not happy. But he decides to try again, making one change. He takes Balaam to a place of higher elevation. Let's get up closer to God. He will try the same thing the third time. This time Balaam just went up on a hill outside of the city. Next Balak will try a field at the top of Mount Pisgah. Finally, he tries the top of Mount Peor, even higher up, saying, "Perhaps it will be agreeable to God that you curse them for me there (23:27)." Balak treats God like all pagans treat God whether they are ancient pagans or modern pagans. Also, sometimes the way we treat God, if we change up the formula maybe we can please God or manipulate him into doing what we want him to do. Balak's part is to change the height, the location of the prophecy. We also notice change within the prophecies.

For example, Balaam's spiritual insight seems to increase with each. He begins the third and fourth this way.

"The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor,
And the oracle of the man whose eye is opened;
⁴ The oracle of him who hears the words of God,
Who sees the vision of the Almighty,
Falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered,

We have the speaking lesson from the donkey. Balaam can only speak what God gives him to speak. These words focus on the seeing lesson from the donkey. Spiritual truth can only be understood if God gives a person eyes to see. The verse, “Falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered,” applies to the humiliating experience with the donkey. It is often necessary to be humbled in order to truly see. Balaam was humbled. And in being humbled, his eyes are uncovered, “falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered” he sees.

Balak has increased the height to try to get closer to God. But God has taught Balaam the message that you can't speak what I don't give you to speak and you can't see what I don't let you see. I am in control of this and you don't manipulate me to curse Israel. And so, the move backfires. Balak tries to manipulate God. It is not going to work. And what happens is an ever-increasing blessing for Israel from oracle to oracle. We see an intensification and heightening of Israel's strength and position. In the first oracle, the Israelites are simply "a people who dwells apart" and a people who "cannot be counted." In the second oracle, we are told "the shout of the king is among them (23:21)." And they are described as a lioness that "will not lie down until it devours the prey (23:24)." That's not something the King of Moab wants to hear. It is heightened in the third oracle, Israel is described as a spreading garden, "And his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted (24:7)." This nation goes to battle with horns of a wild ox. And now he is a male lion. "He couches, he lies down as a lion, and as a lion, who dares rouse him (24:9)?" After the third oracle, Balak's anger burns against Balaam. And with good reason. Brought in to curse Israel, Balaam curses Moab. And he uses the words of the Abrahamic promise to do it. He ends this third oracle this way, speaking about Israel, "Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you (24:9)." Who is cursing Israel? Moab. So, who is going to be cursed? Moab.

Balak ends Balaam's employment without honor, without pay. It seems a mark of Balaam's reputation that Balak does not end his life as well. Balaam responds, "What else could I do? I can only say what is given me to say." Then he adds an unasked for oracle that lifts Israel up to an even higher point. The oracles have successively heightened the language of kingship and of military might. This last one goes even a step further. This is Numbers 24:17b-18.

A star shall come forth from Jacob,	A scepter shall rise from Israel,
And shall crush through the forehead of Moab,	And tear down all the sons of Sheth.
¹⁸ Edom shall be a possession,	Seir, its enemies, also will be a possession,
While Israel performs valiantly.	

This prophecy takes the proclamation of king in Israel to a whole new height, especially from our vantage point looking back. We see that this is going to be king David but even beyond king David, this is messianic! "A star shall come forth from Jacob, a scepter shall rise from Israel." Balaam ends as one of the great prophets of the Old Testament. His oracles make it into the text of Scripture as "thus saith the Lord." He spoke the very word of God. And there is little in his interaction with Balak to make us doubt Balaam's faithfulness. There is only one little hint of foreshadowing that readers would miss the first few times they read the story. But then you read it enough, you see a connection. When Balak fired Balaam, Balaam said to Balak, "And now, behold, I am going to my people; come, *and* I will advise you what this people will do to your people in the days to come (24:14)." "I will advise you." What does that mean? What kind of advice? Well, at first it sounds like a parting shot where Balaam says that he is going to tell Balak how badly Israel is going to beat up on Moab in days to come. That is sort of what he just said about his prophecy of king David coming and crushing the forehead of Moab. But is that all this means or alludes to? Does Balaam have some other advice or counsel for Balak? We are going to see.

Balaam and the Sin at Peor (25 and 31)

So, after we receive this wonderful prophecy of blessing and grandeur for Israel which includes the language of Abrahamic covenant and a foreshadowing of the future Messiah, we are reminded of the great problem of human covenant with Yahweh. We are going to see this with the sin at Peor. How does the burning, holy fire of God dwell on the dry bush that is Israel? The first generation out of Egypt seems particularly skilled in pointing out how big a problem this is. This is Numbers 25:1-5.

¹ While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. ² For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. ³ So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor, and the LORD was angry against Israel. ⁴ The LORD said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of the people and execute them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel." ⁵ So Moses said to the judges of Israel, "Each of you slay his men who have joined themselves to Baal of Peor."

The sin of Peor involves harlotry in both the literally sense of sexual relations with the Moabites and Midianites, and also the metaphoric sense of false worship with other gods. The dynamic here has a parallel with Exodus. At the beginning of the Balaam story the enemy appears to be outside Israel. Nations want to go to war against and so, seek spiritual power to add them in that effort. God turns their strategy back against them, declaring his intent to protect Israel, lifting them up as a mighty nation victorious over their enemies. In Exodus the big problem appeared to be Egypt. Here the big problem seems to be the Moab-Midian alliance.

But in the very next chapter after Balaam's prophecy, we immediately see, as with the Exodus story, that the enemy to worry about is not outside the people of God but inside the people of God. It is their own sinful hearts and their own lack of spiritual fortitude that is going to be their downfall. Without have even crossed the river Jordan yet, the people disobey the warning, the specific warning that God gave them at Sinai, not to cave in to pagan culture, not to be attracted away through relationship, through romantic relationship, to accept and embrace this pagan culture. But they willingly go, they are tempted into the worship of gods that are not God.

The sin of Peor ends with Phinehas, a grandson of Aaron, who acts on Moses' command and executes a brazen Israelite who flaunts his relationship with a Midianite woman in the middle of the Israelite camp. And God praises Phineas, saying of him, "he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not destroy the sons of Israel in my jealousy." The zeal of Phineas became famous

in Israel as the example of a man whose heart is really burning for the glory of God. This Phineas was a priest of the second generation out of Egypt. And his action, even though it is a very harsh action, a harsh judgment coming in the middle of a plague and in the anger of God against Israel, Phineas himself is an example of righteousness and the righteousness of the second generation. So, it is ending really badly for the first generation but positively for the second generation. His action completes that transition from the grumbling, rebellious generation. We are done with the old. It is now time for the new. The next chapter, Chapter 26, begins with the census of the second generation and that report that the first generation has died out, all but Joshua and Caleb and Moses, but he will also soon die. The period of the wilderness is over. It is now time to prepare to enter the land. So, most of this third section of Numbers, chapters 26-36 deals with laws for preparation to enter.

There is in this last section a narrative of one more battle. The second generation engages these treacherous Moabites and Midianites. And they achieve complete victory. The story of the battle also completes for us the story of Balaam with two brief passages. We finally get to see the state of his heart. Numbers 31:8 tells us, "They killed the kings of Midian along with the rest of their slain: Evi and Rekem and Zur and Hur and Reba, the five kings of Midian; they also killed Balaam the son of Beor with the sword." Balaam? What is he doing there? What is he doing still with Moab and Midian? Two more verses tell us, Numbers 31:15-16.

And Moses said to them, "Have you spared all the women? Behold, these caused the sons of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor, so the plague was among the congregation of the Lord."

This is the quality of biblical narrative. It has just been drawing out this idea of who is this Balaam. We have been set up all along to wonder about him. What kind of man is he? With whom does his allegiance truly lie? And we have been getting some mixed signals. Here we get final confirmation. Balaam's allegiance lies with Balaam. When he was fired by Balak, he said, "I will go but first I will advise you." And so, we see he did. He gave counsel. Balaam encouraged a friendly policy of interaction with Israel. Something like this, "Tempt them away from their God with your women and with feasts to the gods. That is the only way to bring wrath on Israel. Use sexuality to entice them into worship of your own gods. If you can do that God will punish them for you." And the plan almost worked.

Conclusion

The Balaam story is an intriguing example of prophecy. True prophecy may or may not come out of the faithfulness of a prophet's heart. The minimum requirement is a willingness to repeat the words that are given. We wonder if Balaam became a faithful believer in Yahweh. He obeys God. His words are sound. His ministry is sound. He gets results. So, we might be shocked by his end to see him with the enemy.

We are shocked when fruitful, biblical, skillful Christian evangelists and musicians and pastors have their hidden sin uncovered and revealed, when they commit adultery, when embezzle funds, when they walk away from Jesus. If we walk with God long enough, we learn that a man can be gifted by God without having a heart for God. He can be faithful in communicating the truth of God. He can even have a real impact on other people for the glory of God. People's lives can be changed. And yet, he himself not be right at all with God in his inner life. The gifted man may have accepted that there is real power and influence in communicating the words of God. He has figured out that is how you build a church or ministry or family. And yet, without letting it become apparent on the outside, he is really in it for himself. He is communicating the glories of God for his own glory. He may not even be able to fully admit that to anybody, his own motives having become so mixed up in his message. His own skillfulness and fruitfulness and honor in ministry have become his identity. It is ultimately about him, not about God. He is serving God. But he is not seeking to know God. He is seeking to gain the glory that the service brings. His self-glory comes by attaching himself to God's glory. Balaam was

spiritually gifted by God. He was given skill and insight. We don't know about his previous life. We don't get that story. But in this story, he is humbled by God, he repents, he speaks the truth. He is used by God. He communicates biblical truth, part of the Bible. He contributes to the Bible. By taking part in proclaiming the glory of God, he himself was glorified. Most men would have just spoken a curse and taken the gold. These men are even easier to understand, a true charlatan. Balaam is this more complex case of the man who truly is being used by God and maybe even truly believes in this message that he is telling other people. But internally, Jesus is not the bread of life. He is not feeding off of his relationship with God. He is feeding off of his own success and glory in ministry. It was never really about God for Balaam. Balaam was serving Balaam.

And so, Balaam's name has become associated with so-called believers who distort biblical truth to tempt the people of God into accepting societal norms of sexuality and idolatry that are in opposition to God. Balaam is known for his final counsel to Balak. This is how you ruin the people of God. You tempt them with the pleasures of society with the gods of society or at least with getting their vision of God to conform with society. John made this connection, writing in Revelation 2:14 to the church in Pergamum, he states, "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." Leaders who say that the church ought to conform to secular systems of belief and behavior in order to make the church attractive and relevant and prevent the loss of numbers, have fallen in line with the counsel of Balaam. They claim that the only way to keep the church alive is to become like the surrounding culture, to accept the surrounding values even if they are contrary to the out of date values of the Bible. And Balaam could tell them, "On the contrary, conforming to cultural norms of behavior and conforming to a cultural vision of God that is opposed to the biblical vision is actually the most sure way to kill your church. That's the advice I gave Balak. And it almost worked."

Reflection Questions

1. As you read the story of Balaam and the donkey in 22:1-35, what do you notice as interesting or important or strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What stands out to you to suggest that Balaam is a faithful follower of Yahweh? What suggests that he is not?
3. What do you think about the suggestion that in this story Moses intentionally leaves us to wonder about the state of Balaam's heart? Is that the correct way to read this story? Do you think the Bible is intentionally presenting us with a complex character who interacts with God, obeys God, speaks for God, yet does not really walk with God?
4. What stands out to you in the sin of Peor story in Numbers 25:1-17?
5. Why is God so angry with the people over their behavior? Can you align your heart with the anger of God? Do you feel why this is so detestable to God?
6. How does Phinehas stand out as a righteous man? Can you align your heart with approval for his actions? Or does he seem like a religious extremist to you? If you wanted to portray Phinehas negatively, how would you describe him and his actions? If you wanted to portray Phinehas positively, how would you describe him?
7. Were you surprised by Balaam's end in Numbers 31:8, 15-16? Why does the story set us up to be surprised?
8. Have you been hurt or shocked by the sin of a prominent Christian being revealed? How does Balaam help us to think about the complexity of spiritually gifted people who seemingly lead a God-honoring life, and then are revealed to have a dark side?
9. How does the Balaam story challenge you in your walk with God?