

Balaam: A Prophet for Profit

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Across the pages of Scripture march men and women from all walks of life. The Holy Spirit customarily gives a camera-sharp picture of each one of them. There is generally a clear delineation of character that the Holy Spirit gives to us in a few words.

There are some exceptions to this. There are those whose character is fuzzy. Darkness hides their true nature, and we are not always sure that we have a correct estimation of it. Let me mention some of them. In the Old Testament we see Cain, Esau, Balaam, Samson, Saul, and Absalom. We can't be sure about these men. And in the New Testament there is the rich young ruler (we wonder if he ever came back to Christ); there are Judas, Demas, and Ananias and Sapphira. These are characters who walk in the shadows.

One of these, Balaam, is clearly a prophet for profit. He is one of those enigmatic and mysterious characters in the Word of God, one of the strangest characters in all of Scripture. The question arises: Is Balaam a genuine prophet of God? Or is he a religious racketeer? It's difficult to answer. Is Balaam sincerely seeking to serve God, or is he a fake, as phony as a three-dollar bill?

You be the judge. I'll attempt to tell you all that I have gathered concerning him, and I've read everything that I could put my hands on.

I will let you decide concerning this man. I'm confident that a great many people, when they read Numbers 22, 23, 24 and 25, are ready to dismiss Balaam as an unsavory and an unworthy character not worth further consideration. But you can't do that. Even before you finish the Old Testament, Micah tells us that we're to remember him. Notice what the prophet says,

O My people, remember now what Balak king of Moab counseled, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him, from Acacia Grove to Gilgal, that you may know the righteousness of the LORD. (Micah 6:5)

In other words, Micah says you can't forget him; you can't ignore him because he is a tremendous lesson for God's people. And the very interesting thing is that there is more said in Scripture concerning Balaam than there is said about Mary the mother of Jesus. There is more said about him than about ten of the apostles of the Lord all put together. Therefore, the Word of God does give some emphasis to him.

The New Testament mentions him three times – always in connection with apostasy. In three of the apocalyptic messages of the New Testament you will find references to this man. The first is found in 2 Peter 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.

That's the first statement, a warning concerning the "way of Balaam." And then Jude, in his little book, in the eleventh verse, says:

Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah.

Jude warns of the "error of Balaam." The *error* of Balaam and the *way* of Balaam are not the same. Also John in Revelation, when giving the prophetic history of the church, traces the period

when the martyr church would stand against the world, then later when the world like a flood would come inside the church. Our Lord's message to that church is in Revelation 2:14:

But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.

Here we are told about the "doctrine of Balaam." The *doctrine* of Balaam is different from the *way* of Balaam, and it's different from the *error* of Balaam. Therefore, in attempting to evaluate this man we need to recognize that these three statements give us a character analysis of Balaam. Let's now go back into his history, back into the Book of Numbers, to understand these warnings.

As Israel advanced toward the promised land, coming to the end of the forty years of wandering in the wilderness, they entered a new territory. It was the territory of certain nations that were their natural enemies. Israel had gained a victory as they came up against the Amorites. Naturally that word had spread so that these nations feared Israel. And when Israel came into the territory of Moab, Balak the king of Moab was afraid to engage them in battle. He resorted to a superstition; that is, he engaged a famous prophet of that day to come and curse Israel. The one he engaged is the one in whom we're interested: Balaam the prophet.

A Reputation for Results

Balaam was a Midianite. He was brought from Aram, out of the mountains of the east. I should say this concerning him: Balaam uttered several of the most wonderful prophecies you'll find in the Word of God. Probably it was on the basis of his prophecy that the wise men came out of the East to Jerusalem asking the question, "Where is He that is born King of the Jews?" So, you see, we cannot dismiss this man and say we need pay no attention to him at all when he gave such an important prophecy as that. Apparently he was a prophet with a very wide reputation in that day – because he got results. And the question is: Was this man a genuine prophet of God?

Let's look at his story beginning in Numbers 22. When the children of Israel came to the east bank of the Jordan River in preparing to cross over into the land God had promised them, naturally Balak the king of Moab did not know their intentions. He did not know but what they intended to attack him and wrest his kingdom from him. Therefore, afraid to make an attack upon them but wanting to defend his kingdom, he sent messengers to Balaam. The word that he sent with the messengers was this:

Therefore please come at once, curse this people for me, for they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall 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.
(Numbers 22:6)

Now that reveals the reputation Balaam had. Balak sent messengers to him who stated their mission, and they brought with them a very handsome price.

So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the diviner's fee in their hand, and they came to Balaam and spoke to him the words of Balak.
(Numbers 22:7)

They came to Balaam with a very handsome price for his services, and they said to him, "Balak has sent us, and he wants to engage your services. He wants you to curse these people that have recently come up out of Egypt. He has found that they're a dangerous people. So far they have had victories everywhere they have met the enemy, and he'd like for you to come up." Well, the very interesting thing is that this man Balaam sounds very genuine at first:

And he said to them, "Lodge here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, as the LORD speaks to me." So the princes of Moab stayed with Balaam. (Numbers 22:8)

Have you ever heard anything more pious than that? He sounds genuine, does he not? Balaam seems to be trying honestly to ascertain the mind of God here. He said, "If you'll stay here this night, I'll make inquiry of God and see whether I'm to go with you or not." Well, he did. And he got God's answer.

And God said to Balaam, "You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed." (Numbers 22:12)

That's God's final word to Balaam. "You're not to go, and you're not to curse these people because I have blessed them." That is God's answer. Now what will be the reaction of Balaam to that? Here is where, I must confess, I'm taken off guard.

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."
(Numbers 22:13)

He says, "I can't go. God has forbidden me to go. I won't go. You can return to your master and tell him."

And the princes of Moab rose and went to Balak, and said, "Balaam refuses to come with us." (Numbers 22:14)

Now if the story ended there, I would have to say that Balaam is one of the most remarkable men of God I've ever met. Here's a man who has a prophecy from God. God gives him a message, and this man obeys the message. He says, "No, I won't go." But, unfortunately, the story does not end there.

Sometimes we also acquit ourselves in a very fine way, don't we? And it's afterward that we have our difficulty.

Now will you notice that Balak is not going to take no for an answer. And, candidly, I believe that he knew something about the character of this man Balaam.

Then Balak again sent princes, more numerous and more honorable than they.
(Numbers 22:15)

It is quite flattering that he now sends some of the most important men of the kingdom to the prophet.

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.’ ” (Numbers 22:16, 17)

They make him an attractive offer.

If I may use the common jargon of the street, Balak upped the ante. He decided to offer Balaam more. Apparently he knew something about character. And now listen to this pious prophet.

Then Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, “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.” (Numbers 22:18)

Why did he say “If he would give me a house full of silver and gold”? Because that’s what he wanted. Why mention it if you’re not thinking about it? “Why,” he says, “I wouldn’t go even if he gave me a house filled with gold and silver.” And when he makes this statement I can hear a lot of the brethren saying, “Amen. Hallelujah for Balaam. What a testimony he’s giving!” But he’s not genuine here. He’s not telling the truth here. He’s going to take a little less than a house filled with gold and silver, but it’s going to be a good price. May I say to you, he said this because he was a covetous man. Now listen to him:

Now therefore, please, you also stay here tonight, that I may know what more the LORD will say to me. (Numbers 22:19)

Why did he say that? He already has God’s answer. Why does he say, “Wait here tonight, and I’ll go to God again to see if He has changed His mind”? God had said to him, “I don’t want you to go, and you’re positively not to curse these people.” That’s God’s answer. That should have been enough. But when you begin to talk about a house filled with silver and gold, it’s well to go back and make inquiry again. God may have changed His mind.

You may have heard the whimsical story of the preacher who came to his wife and said, “I’ve just gotten a call to the church in the next town. It’s a larger town. It’s a much better church. The people in it are more refined and cultured, and they do not cause the trouble they do here; and they’ve offered me a higher salary. I’m going upstairs and pray about this to see if it’s the Lord’s will for me to go.” His wife says, “Fine, I’ll go up and pray with you.” And he says, “Oh, my, no. You stay down here and pack up.” Balaam, you see, is going to pray about it some more although he actually has God’s answer.

However, it does look like God changes His mind, does it not? Notice the development here, for it’s so important.

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.” (Numbers 22:20)

Now somebody says, “God did change His mind.” No, God didn’t. Some hold that there is what is known as the permissive will of God. There is also the direct will of God. And there are a great many Christians today who are taking God’s second best or God’s third best because they will not accept the will of God for their lives. And God permits this. Balaam already had God’s mind. He didn’t need to make further inquiry. But there’s one thing sure – a house full of silver and gold is a nice price for a prophet, and to him there seemed to be no adequate reason why he shouldn’t go. So God permitted him to go.

Perhaps, you remember that the children of Israel complained to Moses and murmured in the wilderness, “We want something besides manna to eat. We’re tired of it. We want meat.” And God said, “I’ll give them flesh. I’ll give them flesh till it comes out of their nostrils and they are sick of it.” Later on, the psalmist wrote, “And He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul” (Psalm 106:15).

There are certain things that you can keep nagging God about that He’ll permit you to do. But, my friend, you’ll dry up spiritually. And there are a great many Christians who could testify to this experience. Do you want God’s permissive will, or do you want His direct will? Do you want Him to give you every one of your prayer requests, or do you really want Him to have His way? Do you want His will to be done, or do you really want God to come over on your side and do what you want done? The interesting thing is that there are times when He will do just that.

Now this man Balaam is being permitted to go, but God is going to warn him every step of the way. And He uses something quite interesting.

So Balaam rose in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the princes of Moab. Then God’s anger was aroused because he went, and the Angel of the LORD took His stand in the way.... (Numbers 22:21, 22)

The reason Balaam can’t see the angel of the Lord is because he is thinking of a house full of silver and gold. He’s a covetous man, and he can’t see spiritual things. And you talk about a rebuke! God knows how to rebuke. This dumb animal on which he’s riding sees the angel – it has more spiritual discernment than he does. Years ago some wag sent me this on a little card (I don’t think he meant anything personal, but he did send it to me): “It was a miracle in Balaam’s day for an ass to speak. It’s a miracle today when one keeps quiet.” My beloved, this is the way of Balaam. Will you listen to Peter again as he evaluates this man:

They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness. (2 Peter 2:15)

The minute that prophet left and went with the messengers of Balak he was going astray. He was out of the will of God. He loved the wages of unrighteousness. He was covetous. Listen to Peter in the next verse:

But he was rebuked for his iniquity: a dumb donkey speaking with a man’s voice restrained the madness of the prophet.

Balaam was thinking, *I just can't wait to get over there and get the job done and get my money.*

My beloved, may I speak very candidly. There are many Christian organizations today that need to be investigated. The way you measure a Christian organization is whether or not it is after the dollar. That's the way. And some of them won't stand inspection. Some of the most covetous people I've ever met are in the Lord's work. I've been in this work nearly half a century, and I've met a great many people. May I say to you, friend, it's always well to investigate and see who's getting rich. Religion can be a racket. And I think every believer is responsible for knowing what he is supporting.

Probing His Personality

Old Balaam had a message from God, but he was covetous. We're merely on the surface; now let's probe a little deeper. Let's look at the personality of Balaam. Jude tells us this:

Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah. (Jude 11)

Suppose you met him and said to him, "Now, Brother Balaam, why are you going with these messengers? We understand that God has told you not to go. Why are you going?" Then he would have started rationalizing – he could have explained his actions and ascribed a worthy motive for his conduct.

The interesting thing is that there is more pious rationalization today in Christian circles than you can imagine. You and I need to examine our motives, friend. This fellow Balaam worries us, doesn't he? Here is a man with God's message, but he is rationalizing behind a very pious front.

Look at the scene in the land of Moab. Israel is camping in the valley surrounded by mountains on every side, and the king of the Moabites, Balak, brings Balaam to a mountaintop overlooking the camp. (I do not think that the Israelites knew what was taking place up there.) And Balak says, "Look! There are the people I'm talking about. I want you to curse them." Notice Balaam's answer:

How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how shall I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced? For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him; There! A people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations. (Numbers 23:8, 9)

This is one of the greatest prophecies concerning the nation Israel, and it's given through a man who's so covetous he can't see anything but the gold and silver! Balak is dissatisfied, naturally, and he says, "You didn't curse them; you blessed them! Let's go to another mountain peak." He takes him around on another side. They go to the top of the mountain and he says, "Now take a look at them and see if you can curse them." Now hear Balaam:

Behold, I have received a command to bless; He has blessed and I cannot reverse it. He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, nor has He seen wickedness in Israel. The LORD his God is with him, and the shout of a King is among them.
(Numbers 23:20, 21)

“I cannot curse them because God does not behold iniquity in Israel.” Now how is he rationalizing? Balaam reasoned that God must condemn Israel. Why? Because there was evil in the camp; there was sin in the camp. In other portions we read that there had been rebellion, there had been overt sin, and God had to judge His own people. But, my beloved, will you hear me very carefully. God will deal with His own people, but He’s not going to let a heathen prophet bring an accusation against them. Whom the Lord has justified no man can condemn. And I say that is wonderful.

The natural man always concludes that God must judge Israel and judge sinners. That’s natural. I’ve heard this a dozen times. Years ago a vile speaking man said to me after a Thursday night Bible study, “How can you say that David is a man after God’s own heart when he’s a murderer and an adulterer?” I said, “It is difficult, isn’t it? But, brother, it sure ought to encourage you and me. If God will take David, maybe He’ll take you and maybe He’ll take me.”

The natural man knows nothing about imputed righteousness. He knows nothing about the righteousness that God makes over to a condemned sinner when he receives Christ – because Christ died for him on the cross, and He was raised from the dead. Now that sinner is put in Christ, and God sees him in Christ. Paul says:

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. (Romans 8:31-33)

Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? Old Balaam could not – nor can any person today or even Satan bring a charge against a sinner who has turned to Jesus Christ.

Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.
(Romans 8:34)

This very day when Satan, the accuser of the brethren, presents himself before God and accuses one who belongs to Christ, the Lord Jesus Christ becomes the believer’s advocate. He says to the Father, “I died for him. He is in Me. And You can receive him just as You receive Me.” Balaam doesn’t know anything about that. That’s the error of Balaam. And that’s the error of a great many folk today.

His Demonic Doctrines

Let’s probe a little deeper now by going into the thought life of Balaam. This brings us to his doctrine. The doctrine of Balaam is satanic, it is demonic, it is hellish, and it is subtle. It’s the same thing that appeared in the Garden of Eden to our first parents. In our Lord’s message to the church at Pergamum He said:

But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the

children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. (Revelation 2:14)

Balaam, you see, finds that God will not permit him to curse these people. He realizes he would have to adopt a different approach if he's going to get the silver and gold – and that's what he has come for, after all. If you think Balaam is going back empty-handed, you are not acquainted with religious racketeers. Because he wants the rich gifts of Balak, he's going to do something now that's terrible.

Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. (Numbers 25:1)

As you read this awful account that follows, you will see what happened as a result of Balaam's counsel. He says something like this to Balak, "Now I can't curse them, but I can tell you how to destroy them. You go down and join them – get the good-looking women of Moab to go down to the camp and get acquainted." And so the Moabite women "caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD..." (Numbers 31:16). With fornication came idolatry into the camp of Israel. What the devil couldn't do by cursing and fighting from the outside, he did from the inside.

Do you know that the church has never been hurt from the outside? The finest years of the church were during its persecution. Never has the church been as rich spiritually, never has it been as evangelistic, never has it reached out to the ends of the earth as it did during those periods. The devil was fighting it from the outside. But he caught on. He couldn't hurt the church from the outside, so he joined it. Read the story of Constantine. Read about the entrance of all sorts of pagan rituals and rites that were incorporated from the inside. What Satan couldn't do from the outside he did from within. There's a great principle here that is applicable to all relationships. Our country, for example, will not, in my opinion, be hurt as a nation from the outside. But I do think we're being destroyed from the inside. At the present time it is also happening to a church I could name. There is not an enemy on the outside that has ever hurt that church, but I know some members who have. A church can be crucified from the inside. That's a principle which Satan has learned.

Let me now make a personal application. Do we understand how God justifies a sinner? Can we say with Paul that there is now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus? The death and resurrection of Christ are my hope today; and because these constitute my hope, I stand before God with no condemnation. But that doesn't end the story.

You and I need to search our own motives, our motives for conduct and action. Why really do you attend church? What is the motive behind your service in the church? Are you seeking applause? Are you seeking power? Perhaps wealth? What's your motive? The difficulty with many of us today is we're acting from mixed motives, and there's frustration in our lives. We're rather like old Balaam. Have you decided whether he's really God's man or not? What kind of fellow is this who could give these wonderful prophecies of God and talk about his relationship to God and then do the thing that he did? He was acting from mixed motives, to say the least. Oh, there are so many today who say, "I want to be a Christian, but I want to go just as far into the world as I can."

Although I don't like to close with this kind of story, I will do so because it illustrates my point. The teacher in a class of little boys had given them the story of Lazarus and the rich man.

She told about the plight of Lazarus, the beggar. She told about how he suffered down here and what he went through. My, she painted it black. Then she told about the rich man and what he enjoyed in this life. Then she moved over on the other side and told about where the rich man went after death – he went to hades. She told about the poor man who was in Abraham’s bosom. That class of little boys was quite solemn. In order to clinch it, she asked, “Which would you rather be, the rich man or Lazarus the beggar?” Well, not one of those little fellows answered. She waited a few moments for it to sink in. Finally, one little fellow put up his hand. He said, “I’d like to be the rich man here and Lazarus hereafter.”

There are a lot of Christians like that today. They want to be the rich man here and Lazarus over there – and they think they can do it. If Balaam is in heaven, then they can do it. But the Holy Spirit doesn’t even tell us. You figure it out.

And then I read further on that Balaam was killed by the Israelites (Numbers 31:8). He was on the wrong side – Balaam, a prophet for profit. What kind of man was he? What kind of Christian are you today? What kind of Christian am I? Paul says that we ought to examine ourselves. If you are God’s child, you are not under condemnation before Him, and He won’t accept Satan’s charge against you. But He Himself will search your heart and He will search mine.