

The Crooked Wand

From Sinai to Canaan

Study 8

Warmup



Can you think of a Bible verse or story, that when you first read it, you thought it meant 'this', when it actually meant 'that'? (The story of the lead character in our study is one classic example. His name is pronounced BAY-LM.)

Introduction

The story of Balaam is fascinating, perverse and unnerving. If only Numbers 22-24 were all that we had about Balaam, we might form the opinion that this was a good man and true prophet of the Lord. But because we have the aftermath and the postscript, we know that Balaam was a greedy, conniving sorcerer, whose dark magic God thwarted in order to protect his people.

(The first twelve verses of Numbers 22 merely set the scene. You will need to read chapters 22-25 to understand the full story.)

Israel is gradually making its way to the Promised Land. It has survived (by God's grace) many visible dangers along the way, but on this occasion, there comes an invisible attack. An evil wand is pointed in their direction. Yet God in his sovereignty causes a blessing to flow from Balaam's wand, and a curse to fall on those who did the pointing. King Balak, who was behind the scheme, no doubt wished he had not interfered and had let the Lion of Judah alone!

Read Numbers 22:1-12

¹ Then the Israelites travelled to the plains of Moab and camped along the Jordan across from Jericho. ² Now Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites, ³ and Moab was terrified because there were so many people. Indeed, Moab was filled with dread because of the Israelites. ⁴ The Moabites said to the elders of Midian, "This horde is going to lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field." So Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, ⁵ sent messengers to summon Balaam son of Beor, who was at Pethor, near the River, in his native land. Balak said: "A people has come out of Egypt; they cover the face of the land and have settled next to me. ⁶ Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the country. For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed." ⁷ The elders of Moab and Midian left, taking with them the fee for divination. When they came to Balaam, they

told him what Balak had said. ⁸ "Spend the night here," Balaam said to them, "and I will bring you back the answer the Lord gives me." So the Moabite princes stayed with him. ⁹ God came to Balaam and asked, "Who are these men with you?" ¹⁰ Balaam said to God, "Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent me this message: ¹¹ 'A people that has come out of Egypt covers the face of the land. Now come and put a curse on them for me. Perhaps then I will be able to fight them and drive them away.' " ¹² But God said to Balaam, "Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed."

Numbers 31:7-8 & 14-16

⁷ They fought against Midian, as the Lord commanded Moses, and killed every man. ⁸ Among their victims were Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur and Reba-the five kings of Midian. They also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword.

¹⁴ Moses was angry with the officers of the army-the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds-who returned from the battle. ¹⁵ "Have you allowed all the women to live?" he asked them. ¹⁶ "They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the Lord in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the Lord 's people.

2 Peter 2:13-16

¹³ They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done. Their idea of pleasure is to carouse in broad daylight. They are blots and blemishes, revelling in their pleasures while they feast with you. ¹⁴ With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed - an accursed brood! ¹⁵ They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness. ¹⁶ But he was rebuked for his wrongdoing by a donkey - a beast without speech - who spoke with a man's voice and restrained the prophet's madness.

Revelation 2:12-17

¹² "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. ¹³ I know where you live-where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city-where Satan lives. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. ¹⁵ Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

Other places where Balaam is mentioned:

Deuteronomy 23:3-6 Joshua 13:22, 24:9,10; Nehemiah 13:2; Micah 6:5

First Impressions

Record some of your own first impressions about the passage you have just read.



Commentary

What on earth did Balaam do? As the Israelites neared the Promised Land, King Balak summoned Balaam, and promised him a handsome reward if he could fire down one of his famous curses upon the Israelites. But on each attempt, God turned the words spoken into blessings. Disappointed that he could not get his hands on the money, he counselled Balak that that if the Moabite women invited the Israelites to their pagan rituals, which involved idolatry and gross immorality, the Israelites would fall. That's what they did, and that's what happened (Numbers 25). Balaam got his money, Balak got his wish. And Israel should have been more obedient.

Question 1

The Israelites are now just four months away from crossing the Jordan River, and are camped across the river from Jericho. What is poignant about a spiritual attack coming so close to their reaching their destination?

Question 2

The Israelites it seems, were oblivious to what was happening on the heights around them. A wand was being pointed at them and they did not know it. Nor did they know that God had turned the intended curses into blessings. What is comforting about that?

Question 3

One of Balaam's prophecies is stunning in its content, for it speaks about a star who will arise out Israel, and who will crush heads (Numbers 24:15-17).

¹⁵ Then he uttered his oracle: "The oracle of Balaam son of Beor, the oracle of one whose eye sees clearly, ¹⁶ the oracle of one who hears the words of God, who has knowledge from the Most High, who sees a vision from the Almighty, who falls prostrate, and whose eyes are opened: ¹⁷ "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Sheth.

There seems to be a double meaning to these verses. What do suppose the double fulfillment might look like?

Question 4

The New Testament speaks in very strong terms about the sin of Balaam (eg 2 Peter 2:15, Jude 11, and Revelation 2:14). What are some of the errors that Peter, Jude and Jesus are warning against?

Question 5

Some Christians worry that hexes might be put upon them unawares. What is helpful in this story to counter that fear? See also these verses: Isaiah 54:17, 1 John 4:4.

Question 6

Some Christians need to "worry a bit more" about the power of temptation. What is instructive in this story (particularly chapter 25:1-3) about Christians taking responsibility for walking in the way of obedience? See also 1 Corinthians 10:6-14.

Conclusion

As you close, read (or do your best to sing) either the third verse of Martin Luther's famous hymn 'A safe stronghold' (or sometimes known as 'A mighty fortress'), or the Aaronic Blessing (Numbers 6:24-26):

*And were this world all devils o'er,
And watching to devour us,
We lay it not to heart so sore;
Nor they can overpower us.
And let the prince of ill
Look grim as e'er he will,
He harms us not a whit;
For why his doom is writ;
A word shall quickly slay him.*

