

## Prophet For Sale or Rent

Numbers 22:7-21

### Slide 1

Last week we began a new series focusing on the “diviner” Balaam. Starting at the beginning of the Book of Numbers, I walked you through the issues of that first generation of Israelites that caused God to let them wander in the wilderness for 40 years until they had died.

Then we followed the second generation as they gained confidence by defeating the nations that stood in their way until they finally got to the land of Moab.

Its here that the story of Balaam really begins. The Israelites stopped at Moab only to rest, not to settle down permanently, but the Moabites didn't know that.

Because, when Balak, the king of Moab awoke the next morning, he was “*filled with dread*” since he had heard what they had done to his neighbors and, on top of that, he knew they would ruin him economically.

Therefore, he devised a plan to get rid of them. Conspiring with the Midianites, he decided to hire a “diviner” to curse the Israelites so he could drive them from his land.

Today, we take up the story with the emissaries of Moab and Midian as they arrived in Pethor to hire Balaam.

Numbers 22:7, “*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.*”

When they found him, they explained what Balak wanted and showed him the “*fee for divination*” he had authorized.

Notice that Balaam made no immediate commitment one way or the other.

Numbers 22:8, *“Spend the night here,” Balaam said to them, “and I will report back to you with the answer the LORD (Yahweh) gives me.” So the Moabite officials stayed with him.*”

He just asked the delegation to spend the night so he could check with God about their proposition.

Now, I’m not sure if this was his true reason, or if he was just putting on a show so he could tell them in the morning that it was going to be a tough job and he would need more money.

It’s interesting though, when you stop to think about it, that Balaam used the proper name for the God of Israel, *“Yahweh,”* rather than employing one of the more generic names available like *“Elohim.”*

Remember, in Numbers 22:5b-6, Balak only said:

*“A people has come out of Egypt; they cover the face of the land and have settled next to me. 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 land. For I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed.”*

The name of Israel and the name of their God isn’t found in these verses. I believe Balaam’s statement revealed that he knew who these people really were.

And, if Balaam knew this, then surely, he knew about Israel’s exodus from Egypt, and maybe something of the covenant God had made with them.

So, Balaam tells “*the Elders*” that he needed to sleep on it and would get back to them in the morning.

Now, like I said, I believe that Balaam was going to try and soak them for more money, but his plans were changed.

## **Slide 2**

Numbers 22:9-11, *God came to Balaam and asked, “Who are these men with you?” Balaam said to God, “Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent me this message: ‘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.’”*

The expression, “*God came to...*,” that’s used here, makes me believe that God wasn’t responding to Balaam’s efforts to communicate with Him. This phrase implies that God came *unexpectedly*.

This assumption is based on similar events found in Genesis where God unexpectedly “*came to*” Abimelech in a dream, warning him that he was a dead man if he touched Abraham’s wife, Sarah.

And when God “*came to*” Laban, while he was in pursuit of Jacob for fleeing from him and because Rachel stole his household gods. In a dream, God warned Laban not to speak harshly to Jacob.

Therefore, the phrase “*came to...*” suggests that God spoke to Balaam in a dream, like He had done with other pagans like Abimelech and Laban.

Another interesting thing in these verses is the question God asked Balaam. Numbers 22:9, *God came to Balaam and asked, “Who are these men with you?”*

Now, God didn't need Balaam to tell Him who these men were. He already knew who they were. So, why did God ask a question to which He already knew the answer?

Think about it! As parents, we've done the same thing. When we caught our children doing something wrong, we'd ask, "*Just what do you think you're doing?*"

We know the answer, but we wanted to see how honest our children were. If they lied, we dealt with them in a certain way. If they told the truth, then we dealt with them differently.

So, this was a valid question, "*Who are these men with you?*" God knew these men were emissaries from Balak, the king of Moab; men who represented governments that were opposed to the nation Israel.

God knew these men were seeking to persuade Balaam to curse the very people He had blessed.

So, in reality, God's question wasn't "*Who are these men with you,*" but "*What are these men doing in your house as your guests?*"

In order to understand why God cared about whom Balaam had in his house, we must understand the custom of the day.

In Biblical times, to invite someone to be a guest in your home was to grant them the highest level of intimacy and fellowship.

This is why John, in 2 John 1:7-11, instructs believers that false teachers should not be shown such hospitality.

Now, Balaam' answer to God's question leaves much to be desired. As with the emissaries, he tries to manipulate God. Did he think that God didn't know everything?

Numbers 22:10-11, *“Balaam said to God, “Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent me this message: ‘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.’”*

In other words, Balaam was saying, *“God, Balak has asked for help in defending his land against a hoard of people from Egypt. He just wants me to curse them so he can defeat them in battle.”*

Balaam left out the fact that Balak was concerned that the Israelites would live beside him and ruin him economically.

Balaam didn't tell God that Balak had flattered him by stating that whomever Balaam blesses is blessed, and that whomever he curses is cursed.

And so, even though God asked Balaam a very open-ended question, Balaam responded in a tight-lipped fashion. Balaam sought to withhold information from God.

Regardless of Balaam's explanation, God not only forbid him to go with these dignitaries and to meet with Balak, but He forbid Balaam to curse the Israelites since these were His people whom He had blessed.

Numbers 22:12, *“But God said to Balaam, “Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed.”*

God's Will wasn't just crystal clear; it was emphatically stated. So, the next morning Balaam just told the emissaries that God didn't feel that he should take the job.

Numbers 22:13-14, *“The next morning Balaam got up and said to Balak's officials, “Go back to your own country, for the LORD (Yahweh) has refused to let me go with you.” So the Moabite officials returned to Balak and said, “Balaam refused to come with us.”*

Notice that Balaam talked to them just like he spoke to God; he didn't tell them everything.

Balaam didn't tell them that God forbid him to do what they were attempting to hire him to do. He just told them that God refused to give him permission to go with them.

Now, did you catch the subtle difference in what God told Balaam and what Balaam told the emissaries that God had said? God said, "*Do not go...*" and Balaam told them God had "*refused to let me go...*"

To be refused permission to go with these men is quite different from being forbidden to do what they have asked Balaam to do.

The most important truth of all was never conveyed to this delegation. The truth being that, not only could Balaam not curse the Israelites, no one could because God had blessed them.

### **Slide 3**

This sounds like the story's over. Balak made Balaam a tempting offer, God forbids him to accept it, and Balaam sends the delegation back to Balak. But wait...

When the delegation returned and told Balak what Balaam said, his response is interesting and informative.

Numbers 22:15, "*Then Balak sent other officials, more numerous and more distinguished than the first.*"

Balak refused to take "No" for an answer. He's determined to have Israel cursed, and he's likewise determined that Balaam was the man to do it.

Therefore, Balak sent another delegation. But if you read carefully you'll see that Balak doesn't offer Balaam anything new; he simply enhances the original offer.

Numbers 22:16-17, *"They came to Balaam and said: 'This is what Balak son of Zippor says: Do not let anything keep you from coming to me, because I will reward you handsomely and do whatever you say. Come and put a curse on these people for me.'"*

Balak sent a larger and more noble delegation, and, by inference, said, *"Name your own price."*

On the surface, Balaam's response to this enhanced offer seemed commendable. He told them that not only that he couldn't, he wouldn't come, no matter how much he was offered.

Numbers 22:18-19, *"But Balaam answered them, 'Even if Balak gave me all the silver and gold in his palace, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the LORD my God. Now spend the night here so that I can find out what else the LORD will tell me.'"*

It's my personal opinion that Balaam's not only using God to get more money from Balak, but he's banking on God to change His mind by being so righteous. Balaam's trying to use God to further his own interests.

Because, if Balaam was so determined not to transgress the commandment of the Lord, why does he invite this delegation to spend the night with him again, telling them that God may have something new in the morning?

Surely, God's words to him the first time was sufficient to let him know that He wasn't pleased with their request or of Balaam's allowing them to stay the night.

Furthermore, since God had blessed Israel, and this blessing couldn't be reversed, why continue negotiations? It's because Balaam had an inadequate grasp of who God was.

What we must understand is that Balaam couldn't comprehend the sovereignty of God because his pagan "gods" were far from sovereign. In fact, they didn't even exist.

The "gods" Balaam usually dealt with were thought to be open to manipulation by means of persistence (repetition) and extreme measures.

For example, the prophets of Baal sought to gain the attention of Baal by mutilating themselves (1 Kings 18:26-27).

The heathen had their prayer wheels and other means by which they sought to multiply their prayers.

It's like today. There're many parents who don't mean what they say. They tell their children not to do something, and the child just looks them in the eye while doing that very thing.

What do the parents do? They just shrug their shoulders, as if to say, "*What can I do about it?*" So, the child learns that "No" isn't really a final "No."

Children learn that if they persist at the forbidden action long enough, their parents will "fold."

Balaam thought of God in the same way. Why else would he seek to make further inquiry when he's already been given a clear "No"?

But again, God "*came to*" Balaam in the night. This time God instructed Balaam to go with them; however, he must be careful to do only what He says.

Numbers 22:20, *“That night God came to Balaam and said, “Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you.”*

God appears to be changing His mind, doesn't He? How can we explain this, especially when the Angel of the Lord nearly takes Balaam's life for going with these men?

#### **Slide 4**

There's no question as to what God's will for Balaam was in this situation. God clearly forbid Balaam to go or to curse His people.

Remember Numbers 22:12, *“But God said to Balaam, “Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed.”*

I can almost hear Balaam thinking, *“God forbid me to go with that first group of men, but this is a new delegation and they're offering me even more money. Maybe the circumstances have changed. I'll reopen my inquiry and see what He has to say.”*

In principle, nothing had changed. Balak sought Balaam's services to curse the people God had blessed and Balaam was asking the same question to which God had already answered, “No.”

You must understand, it wasn't that Balaam didn't know the will of God, he just didn't want to do it. Balaam didn't want to do what God commanded. Balaam wanted to go with these men.

The money and the fame which Balak offered was just too much for Balaam to turn down. He's determined upon getting around God's will.

So, he must have been extremely happy when God seemed to change His mind in verse 20.

But there's something very important we must understand when we study Balaam and that is: God doesn't approve of everything He allows. At times, God allows men to do things which He has forbidden.

Sometimes God allows men to sin, even though He's condemned and forbidden it. This is known as "*God's permissive will.*"

When God permitted Balaam to accompany these men to meet with Balak, that's an example of God's permissive will.

But let there be no doubt... God isn't pleased when men do the evil that He permits.

God forbid Balaam to go with the delegation that had come, and He also forbid Balaam to curse Israel. So, you can be sure that God was not pleased when Balaam went with the princes of Moab.

Numbers 22:21-22a, "*Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the Moabite officials. But God was very angry when he went.*"

Woe to those who persist in their path of sin, for it's surely the road to destruction. Just because God allows men to sin doesn't mean that He approves of sin.

So, why does God allow men to do what He's forbidden? It's because it'll fulfill His purposes.

When God permits men to sin, it doesn't mean that His Word or His will has changed. It means that He has allowed us to sin for His glory.

In some way, God will use our disobedience to instruct others and to bring about His purposes in a way we'd never have imagined.

The sin of Judas Iscariot in betraying Jesus was the instrument God used to accomplish our redemption on the cross of Calvary.

The rejection of Jesus as the Messiah by the nation Israel opened the door to the evangelization of the Gentiles (Romans 11:11).

The sin of Ananias and Saphira was used of God to bring fear on the church in Jerusalem (Acts 5:11).

David's sin in numbering the Israelites resulted in the purchase of the land on which the future temple would be constructed (2 Samuel 24; 1 Chronicles 21; 2 Chronicles 3:1).

God delayed His punishment on the land of Canaan, so that its sin would be fully developed, and so that the wickedness of the Canaanites could be clearly seen.

Even though the punishment God prescribed on the Canaanites was severe, it was justly deserved (Genesis 15:13-16; see also Matthew 13:24-30; James 1:13-15).

Although God can use the sinful acts of men to accomplish His purposes, this in no way minimizes or reduces the penalty inflicted on them for their sin.

How easy it would be for someone to wrongly conclude that *“since my sin ultimately fulfills the purposes of God, I can live in sin with impunity, as though I were doing God a favor!”* This isn't the case.

God hates sin and He punishes sinners for their sins. Never seek to turn grace into a license to sin. As we'll see all too soon, Balaam paid a very high price for his sin.

We must understand that when we sin, God may withhold His punishment for a time. In fact, divine punishment for sin is often delayed, in order for us to see its consequences and repent.

## **Slide 5**

### Conclusion

Therefore, getting away with sin for a season should in no way lead us to conclude that there'll be no dire consequences in the future.

Apart from God's grace, Balaam would have died on the way to meet Balak. How easy it would have been for Balaam to reason that he wouldn't be punished for his sin but rewarded for it.

How eager men are to believe that God won't condemn them eternally for their sins. Eve foolishly believed Satan when he assured her that she would surely not die for eating the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3:4).

Balaam's a reminder that there's a "payday," someday. Now, it's not until the end of the Book of Numbers that Balaam dies, but he dies because of his sin.

So never mistake the longsuffering of God for apathy. God will most certainly reward the righteous and punish the wicked.

As an aside, the story of Balaam underscores the vital role which the Pentateuch plays for Old and New Testament saints alike.

It's God who blesses and curses. And these cursings and blessings are determined on the basis of how we deal with Abraham and his offspring.

If we wish to be blessed, then we must bless those whom God has blessed because anyone who curses those whom God has blessed will be cursed.

Balak sought to flatter Balaam by telling him that he was known for being able to bless or curse whomever he wished.

The truth was that God had blessed Israel, and there was nothing Balaam could do to change this.

The Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) brings the events of Numbers 22-25 into focus.

It's in the Book of Genesis that we learn of the covenant God made with Abraham, which describes the blessing God pronounced upon Abraham and his offspring (12:1-3).

It's in Genesis and Exodus that we learn of the link between the Israelites, the Moabites, the Ammonites (Genesis 19:30-38), and the Midianites (Genesis 37:28, 36; Numbers 10:29).

It's from the Pentateuch that we are first warned about diviners, like Balaam, who are false prophets (see Deuteronomy 13, 18).

The Pentateuch is foundational to our understanding of God's dealings with Israel and with the Gentiles. It's foundational to our understanding of the gospel.

Would that Balaam had been better informed concerning the matters dealt with in the Pentateuch.