

A Brief Survey of Balaam's Prophecies Numbers 23:7-10, 18-24, 24:3-9, 15-25

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What Balak couldn't grasp, and Balaam only began to understand, was that God's relationship with Israel was based upon His covenant with Abraham and his descendants.

Unlike men, God won't break His promises. No matter what Balak offered, there was no way Balaam, or any other prophet could manipulate Him.

God would never abandon His people. He had eternally committed Himself to them in the form of a covenant:

Genesis 12:1-3, "The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

In the light of God's covenant promise to Abraham, the forefather of the nation Israel, Balak's request for Israel to be cursed is seen for what it was—impossible.

All the prophecies of Balaam are the outgrowth of God's covenant promises to Israel.

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Balaam's first prophecy was short and to the point.

Numbers 23:7-8, "Then Balaam spoke his message: "Balak brought me from Aram, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains. 'Come,' he said, 'curse Jacob for me; come, denounce Israel.' How can I curse

those whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the LORD has not denounced?"

Balak brought Balaam from Aram and instructed him to curse Israel. Of course, this was impossible for Balaam because, as a prophet, he could only echo what God had declared.

God hadn't denounced Israel, so neither could Balaam. This was a nation that stood apart from all other nations, and they would become even greater in number and strength.

Numbers 23:9-10, "From the rocky peaks I see them, from the heights I view them. I see a people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations. Who can count the dust of Jacob or number even a fourth of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my final end be like theirs!"

Not only could Balaam not curse them; he indicated that he wished he could enter into their blessings, which included a hope that extended beyond the grave.

Now Balak didn't like this. He accused Balaam of blessing his enemies instead of cursing them like he wanted.

So Balak said, let's try this again, but in a different location. What Balak didn't understand was that regardless of his location, Balaam's words would become more pointed and forceful.

So, when they arrived at the new location, Balaam's second oracle began with words that I would paraphrase this way: *"Sit up straight and listen, Balak, because God has a word for you, and you'd better pay attention!"*

Numbers 23:18-24, "Then he spoke his message: "Arise, Balak, and listen; hear me, son of Zippor. God is not human, that he should lie,

not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill? I have received a command to bless; he has blessed, and I cannot change it. "No misfortune is seen in Jacob, no misery observed in Israel. The LORD their God is with them; the shout of the King is among them. God brought them out of Egypt; they have the strength of a wild ox. There is no divination against Jacob, no evil omens against Israel. It will now be said of Jacob and of Israel, 'See what God has done!' The people rise like a lioness; they rouse themselves like a lion that does not rest till it devours its prey and drinks the blood of its victims."

Balak might be used to giving orders to men, and even to his "gods," but the God of Israel was different.

He's not a man. He doesn't lie, He doesn't break His promises, and He certainly doesn't take orders from men.

If God had committed Himself to bless Israel, that was the way it would be. Since God had commanded Balaam to bless Israel, he couldn't reverse it.

Balak assumed that God's blessings were based upon the merits of those who were blessed.

But Balaam pulled the rug out from under Balak by informing this heathen king that God's blessings were based upon the principle of grace.

God hadn't made His covenant with Israel based upon Israel's righteousness. He doesn't look upon the many sins of Jacob.

God's kindness to Israel was rooted in His grace. This was the basis for His leading Israel out of Egypt.

Because God defended Israel against her enemies, they were in essence invincible.

There was no way that Balaam could reverse this to bring about Israel's downfall. To oppose Israel was to oppose Israel's God.

Verse 24 concludes with a powerful word of promise and warning. What God had done for Israel showed His faithfulness and power, but God had greater things to do for His people in the future.

Numbers 23:24, *The people rise like a lioness; they rouse themselves like a lion that does not rest till it devours its prey and drinks the blood of its victims.*

This final verse of Balaam's second prophecy is a powerful word of warning that Israel would ultimately destroy their enemies.

The point of all this is quite clear—no nation should become the enemy of Israel, but this was precisely what Balak did.

The emphasis in this second oracle was on the God of Israel, His nature, and His attributes and, based upon God's covenant and His character, it was certain the blessings of Israel were sure and secure.

Because of His covenant relationship with Israel, as evident in the exodus, no nation should dare oppose the people of God. To do so was to become the enemy of God and to face destruction.

Therefore, if there was a curse to be pronounced, it must be voiced upon God's enemies.

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Now, let's look at Balaam's third oracle.

Numbers 24:3-9, *“And he spoke his message: “The prophecy of Balaam son of Beor, the prophecy of one whose eye sees clearly, the prophecy of one who hears the words of God, who sees a vision from the Almighty, who falls prostrate, and whose eyes are opened: “How beautiful are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel! “Like valleys they spread out, like gardens beside a river, like aloes planted by the LORD, like cedars beside the waters. Water will flow from their buckets; their seed will have abundant water. “Their king will be greater than Agag; their kingdom will be exalted. “God brought them out of Egypt; they have the strength of a wild ox. They devour hostile nations and break their bones in pieces; with their arrows they pierce them. Like a lion they crouch and lie down, like a lioness—who dares to rouse them? “May those who bless you be blessed and those who curse you be cursed!”*”

As I read the first words of this third oracle, I was impressed with the way Balaam had an ever-growing sense that he was speaking authoritatively for God since verses 3 and 4 are said so forcefully.

Balaam claimed to speak for the “gods,” but now he realized that the revelation he had received was from the one True God, and that his words were therefore authoritative.

In today’s terminology, Balaam had come to believe in the inspiration and authority of Scripture. He understood that what he was speaking was the Word of God.

It certainly affected the way Balaam dealt with Balak, and it should have affected the way Balak responded to the Word of the Lord, but it didn’t.

The rest of Balaam’s third oracle pronounces a blessing on Israel. How this must have galled Balak, since He was paying for cursing, not blessing!

How different was the way God looked upon the Israelites than Balak. Balak saw them as a threat to him and to his people. God saw them as beautiful, like gardens, planted by the river.

As God faithfully watered them, they would grow stronger, so that they would utterly defeat their enemies. The imagery of a lion devouring its prey introduced in the last oracle is once again employed.

And then the Abrahamic covenant is reiterated in a way that precisely reverses what Balak had sought!

Balak was hot with anger. How dare Balaam turn the tables on him, blessing the very people he was paying him to curse, and cursing those whom he insisted that he bless!

But Balak knew how to hurt a fellow like Balaam—he fired him and withheld his pay.

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Balaam tried to explain, but Balak's not listening. In spite of his anger, Balaam gave Balak a final, unsolicited word from the Lord in his fourth and final oracle.

Numbers 24:15-25, *“Then he spoke his message: “The prophecy of Balaam son of Beor, the prophecy of one whose eye sees clearly, the prophecy 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: “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 people of Sheth. Edom will be conquered; Seir, his enemy, will be conquered, but Israel will grow strong. A ruler will come out of Jacob and destroy the survivors of the city.” Then Balaam saw Amalek and spoke his message: “Amalek was first among the nations, but their end will be utter destruction.” Then he saw the Kenites and spoke his*

message: "Your dwelling place is secure, your nest is set in a rock; yet you Kenites will be destroyed when Ashur takes you captive." Then he spoke his message: "Alas! Who can live when God does this? Ships will come from the shores of Cyprus; they will subdue Ashur and Eber, but they too will come to ruin." Then Balaam got up and returned home, and Balak went his own way."

The introduction to this oracle made it clear that the words which followed were inspired by God, thus reliable and authoritative.

In fact, verses 17-19 are a sermon in and of themselves. Here, this pagan prophet spoke the most beautiful and pointed words of prophecy yet.

In this messianic prophecy, Balaam went farther than many true prophets had done, or would do.

God had promised to bless Abraham and his offspring in the Abrahamic covenant. Now, Balaam now tells us how this would take place.

The blessings that would come to Israel would come through the Messiah. Balaam actually saw Him. He was a true prophet for a few moments of his life, at least so far as his words were concerned.

This Messiah wasn't only coming to save Israel, He would destroy Israel's enemies (verses 17b-18).

These closing words of Balaam's prophecy spelt out defeat for all who would join together against God's people.

In spite of all their strengths and strongholds, nothing would prevent them from the defeat which God had promised in the Abrahamic covenant, and now through Balaam.

With these parting words, Balaam left. It would seem that we've seen the last of Balaam, but Numbers 25 indicates otherwise.

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I'm impressed by the fact that these events weren't taking place before the eyes of the Israelites.

If it weren't for the account of Numbers 22-24, neither Israel nor we would have known that any of these things took place.

I'm reminded of passages in Job and Daniel that speak of the "*spiritual warfare*" that's constantly taking place, unknown to us.

Thank God that He's always protecting us and securing our blessings, when the forces of hell oppose us.

But there are a couple of lessons to learn, too. First, like Balak, we learn that it doesn't pay to oppose the purposes and promises of God. We can never prevail against God.

We must understand that what God says, He means. When we neglect the Word God has spoken to us, we do so at our own peril.

Hebrews 2:1-4, "We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will."

How sad that Balak had everything backwards! The presence of Israel in the land wasn't a threat, but a blessing. All he had to do was to bless Israel. Instead, he sought to curse God's people.

The issue is essentially the same for men and women today. Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's blessings. Based upon our response to Jesus Christ, we're blessed or cursed of God.

Galatians 3:15-16, "Brothers and sisters, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ."

Balaam also teaches us that being close to God isn't enough. As I read through these chapters in the Book of Numbers, I saw Balaam getting closer and closer to the truth.

He even spoke some of the most beautiful words of prophecy we could ever hope to read. And yet, in spite of all this, Balaam never came to faith. He, like Balak, would perish because of his sin.

It isn't enough to be close to God. It isn't even enough to speak words of truth about God. Balaam never really trusted in the God of Israel.

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Conclusion

Are you close to God? Do you attend church, and perhaps even read His Word? You might even teach a Sunday school class. But have you responded to the words of salvation which you have read and taught?

It doesn't matter how close you've gotten to salvation if you haven't received Jesus Christ by faith, the One of whom Balaam spoke, but in Whom he never trusted.

Our text is a wonderful illustration of the sovereignty of God. God's in complete control. He does what He wants, and what He says, He does. No one can thwart His purposes and promises.

The God of Israel is God alone. He's not like the man-made "gods" of the heathen, which could be manipulated to give them what they wanted. Men must bow down to God and be His servants.

The sovereignty of God isn't the basis for protest, but the basis for praise. While the king of Moab didn't submit to the sovereignty of God, an even greater king did.

Daniel 4:28-37, "But at the end of the appointed time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity returned to me. I blessed the Most High, and I praised and glorified the one who lives forever. For his rule is an everlasting rule, and his kingdom extends from one generation to the next. All the inhabitants of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he wishes with the army of heaven and with those who inhabit the earth. No one swats his hand and says to him, 'What have you done?' "At that time my sanity returned to me. I was restored to the honor of my kingdom, and my splendor returned to me. My ministers and my magistrates were seeking me out, and I was reinstated over my kingdom. Tremendous greatness was restored to me. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the king of heaven, for all of his deeds are right and his ways are just. Those who live in pride he is able to bring low."

I find it interesting that some Christians resist the Biblical teaching that God is sovereign—in absolute control.

Would we really want it any other way? Because He is sovereign, no one can resist Him or nullify His purposes and promises.

Only God is able to produce everything that He has promised. The One who has all knowledge, and all power is also the One who is loving and merciful.

Who else would we wish to be in control?