

### NUMBERS

#### Lesson 28 - Chapters 23 and 24

We continue the story of Balaam and Balak, which is a theological feast all in itself. Some of the critical biblical principles that will be counted upon as foundational material in the remainder of the Holy Scriptures are here set out before us. And, not the least of which is that a false prophet can at times be correct; further, that God Himself may use this false prophet for His purposes, even having direct contact with him.

Balaam was a false prophet in every sense of the word: he was a diviner, a seer, and a magician. That he knew the God of Israel was to be expected because he ran in the circle of gods. We are reminded in this story that the Evil One can counterfeit and mimic and make things look just as though what was occurring was a blessing from Yehoveh, instead of what it really is: deception.

Last week we discussed the incident with Balaam and his donkey; a talking donkey that could see the Angel of the Lord standing in his path, but Balaam could not because although he was familiar and close to the spiritual world, he was actually spiritually blind. Great lessons were laid out here including the reality that when the path of our desires sometimes seems blocked, there might well be a divine reason for it. And, the wise man will pause and look for the Lord, and not consider the one who only *seems* to be the roadblock as necessarily the problem.

We also saw that the Lord is only willing to go so far in intruding into our free will. Over and over Yehoveh told Balaam that He did not want him to go to King Balak of Moab and do the work of cursing Israel for the King. Yet, Balaam kept going back to God, hoping each time that he could persuade God into changing His mind; Balaam was just not going to take "no" for an answer. Understand: a magician negotiating with a god was just the standard method of divining and Balaam would have had no concept of what to do and how to communicate with the Lord if it wasn't in the only manner he was familiar with. And, so, Yehoveh allowed Balaam to follow his free will even though it put him at odds with the divine will; and, yet, through all of this God accomplished that which He had intended; that Israel would NOT be cursed, and that in fact the blessing that Yehoveh had long ago pronounced upon Israel would be affirmed.

Therefore, we see another foundational God-principle established: the Lord will miraculously accomplish His plan working through men's free will. This is a mystery perhaps as great as Creation or Salvation: how is it possible that the Lord can bring about His will through another's completely FREE will, and more often than not that person's free will is against the plan of God? Yet not only do we see it in the Bible but also as Believers we have seen it in our own lives, almost daily. As we look around us, in our incredibly short life spans, we have seen the

world marching inexorably toward an end that the Lord determined in advance and told us would be and yet He uses the free will and plans of both the evil and the righteous to achieve it all, only forcefully intervening on rare occasions.

Let's reread Numbers chapter 23:13 to the end.

### **READ NUMBERS 23:13 to end**

What we have just read is the 2nd Oracle from God in this story as presented through the mouth of Balaam. The 1st Oracle.....the one we studied last week in the first verses of Numbers 23.....essentially expressed Israel's PRESENT situation (that is, Israel was blessed by God above all other nations, to the point that it was not even to be considered as **one of the nations** in the common sense of it). In that first Oracle, Balaam sees just how blessed and privileged Israel is and so hopes that he can, in some undefined way, partake in Israel's blessing. Balaam ends that 1st Oracle by saying, "*..... May I die the death of the upright, and may my fate be like theirs.*"

Allow me to remind you that this "blessing" of Israel is but another way of re-stating the Abrahamic Covenant. It would be quite appropriate for us to understand that what Balaam MEANS by this (even though he would not have fully understood it), is that he would like to be included in the blessing of Israel that IS the Abrahamic Covenant. Of course the \$64,000 question for us is: how can a non-Israelite (a gentile) be included under the blessings of Israel's most exclusive covenant with God?

This is only one of several times that gentiles in the Bible will express a desire to be put under the covering and benefits of Israel's covenants. A later and perhaps most famous example was Ruth (a gentile woman), who said in Ruth 1:16 of her desire to be joined to Israel's covenants with God, "**Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.**" By the way, notice an interesting coincidence between the Ruth story and the Balaam/Balak episode we're studying: King Balak was King of Moab, and Ruth was a Moabite (of course I say "coincidence" tongue-in-cheek).

Now in this 2nd Oracle of God (made through Balaam) a central point is made to the entire story of the Mesopotamian diviner and the King of Moab and it is this: whereas all other religions (all false) use magic and sorcery to discover the will of the gods, the God of Israel makes His will known by means of His prophets. And Yehoveh does this by direct oracle, and not by means of magical omens as was the universal practice of this era.

The Hebrews were given a great resource that the rest of the world did not have: direct revelation. The rest of the world, because they had given up obedience to the Creator and were in essence worshipping the Evil One, were trying by their own means to discover the will of their many gods. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has not left men who seek after Him in that position. We have the Holy Spirit within us for a direct connection to the God of the Universe; and we have His Word of Truth in our hands as we study today. Our job is NOT to determine what is truth and what is not in our Bibles for it is all true; our job is but to **accept** it ALL as truth, and to obey. Our challenge is also to discover how to apply the truth to our lives

and to our relationship with the Creator. We do not have to wonder how the world began, or where mankind came from, because we're told it. We do not have to wonder at our future, either, because we're also told that. As a good friend of mine said in a recent magazine article: ***" Men who choose to believe that 'in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth' have a foundation for understanding the origin, purpose, and consummation of life. Men who choose to reject that statement go through life like a blind man in a dark room, looking for a black cat that isn't there; never knowing where they came from, where they are going, or how to live between those two termini."***

God's prophets are the end of magical omens for those who trust Him. Israel was in the earliest stages of learning this reality, and the very one who God was using at this moment to make His declaration, a gentile named Balaam, would completely miss that point. Now, let me point out before someone in here does it for me, that indeed a kind of divining tool was permitted for Israel for a time: the Urim and the Thummim, which the High Priest of Israel carried on his ephod. The concept, however, was never for these stones to determine truth: rather it was to indicate God's will in a matter where a godly choice was provided. I cannot tell you exactly how these two stones worked, and there is much disagreement among the great Hebrew Sages about this; nor can I (with certainty) tell you WHY God permitted such a thing. However my conjecture is that we will often see Israel permitted (even instructed) by God to use a ritual or a tool that is very much like a ritual or tool used by the heathen. And I surmise the reason for this is that Israel would have been utterly confused if the Lord required them to instantly unlearn every customary cultural aspect of the known world (the cultural aspects that they had also generally lived by) in favor of a brand new and completely unique one.

Certainly in the Law (the Torah) handed down on Mt. Sinai, a new and unique culture of the Kingdom of Heaven had been ordained but there was no way Israel would immediately adopt every aspect of it, and the Lord well knew it when He gave it. We as modern Believers are in a similar position. We can only grow so fast, and the Church (consisting of so many varied cultures) can only absorb so much. Thus, God reveals to us progressively when the time is right. It astounds me that the very thing Balaam pronounced 3300 years ago, and what it is that Ruth stated a couple hundred years or so later (this concept that if gentiles wanted to be included in God's blessing of mankind it would have to be done via the Abrahamic Covenant of Israel), that only NOW is a growing but tiny segment of the Church beginning to grasp it. Yehoveh says that our relationship with Him is based on Israel's covenants and what sprung from them; and yet, within a few years after Yeshua's death and resurrection, the Church created doctrines denying this very thing. Only now, today, with the return of Israel to her land has a movement begun within the body to undo this errant theology. But it had to wait for the Lord's timing for our blindness to begin to be lifted.

In verse 13, King Balak decides that another setting might induce Balaam to curse the Israelites. He chooses a place called ***Sedeh-zophim***, which literally means "mountain of the watchmen." This is a lookout post, but its primary use is as an astronomical observation point and a place for watching the flight of birds: stars and birds both being standard signs and omens in that era. As this place is also a "high place", altars were built and gods were worshipped there because gods were usually worshipped on hilltops. This is not unlike the way Cathedrals have been built throughout the ages whereby they were often the tallest structures;

therefore a Cathedral also typically served as a local watchtower, a place from which worshippers were called to worship (eventually bells were placed there), and due to its architectural strength, it was often a place of sanctuary for a besieged town.

Balak points out that from the first hilltop location where he took Balaam, only a portion of the enormous encampment of the Israelites could be viewed; but from this 2nd place an even smaller amount could be seen. The thought is that perhaps Balaam was intimidated and cursing fewer people might be more to his liking. Included within all this is the hope that the God that Balaam has been dealing with might also find the conditions more favorable to grant the King of Moab his request that Israel be cursed.

The result of the 2nd attempt goes equally as bad for King Balak as did the 1st: Balaam once again follows Yehoveh's instruction to bless....not curse.....His people, Israel. Notice as well that the Lord directs Balaam's speech at King Balak and the Lord says, listen up Balak. And immediately yet another God-principle is declared: the Lord is NOT capricious. He doesn't say things and then not follow through. Along with that, in verse 19, God says that He is not **ben 'adam**, meaning "s son of man". This is just another way of saying that the Lord is not a mere human being or a mortal that is always changing their mind.

Now understand, this was VERY strange to the ears of both Balaam and Balak. What god doesn't constantly change their minds? Capriciousness IS the nature of gods and goddesses. Even more this was the era when most kings were seen as the incarnation of one god or another; so for the Lord to declare that He is no **ben 'adam** throws a real curve ball into the situation.

Now that YHWH has clearly established some important aspects of His nature and character, through Balaam the Lord makes it clear (again) that what He blesses no man can reverse. Therefore Israel is safe and Moab really needs to steer clear.

Quickly another theological principle is established in verse 23: the Lord has neither established magic nor does He permit divination as an acceptable way of His people to deal with Him. Within Israel it simply is not to exist. This is the expression of the Lord's Law and His ideal unfortunately, not of reality. Because in reality the Hebrews constantly turned to divination and idolatry, and for this abomination terrible divine disciplines were laid upon them.

The 2nd Oracle from God ends with describing Israel as having the strength and ferocity of a lion (a common metaphor in that day), and poetically describes Israel destroying their enemies.

Well 2nd attempt to curse Israel didn't go any better than the first time, did it? The blessing this time was even MORE powerful and pointed. And the obviously flustered Balak blurts out to Balaam, "if you're not going to curse them for me, at least don't bless them!" Balaam repeats that he really has no choice in the matter.

King Balak (not used to having people not do his bidding) still doesn't give up. Let's give it another try he says to Balaam, and volunteers to take Balaam to another place to the peak of Peor. We'll find in subsequent chapters that this is, of course, another pagan high place

dedicated to Ba'al. Just as the Lord told Balaam on a number of occasions that He did not want Balaam to go to Balak, Balak has now been told on a number of occasions that God is NOT going to change His mind and curse His own people. Again we see the pagan mind of that era at work; King Balak believes that he manipulates gods and that perhaps he just needs to appease this God a little more.

So off to the peak of Peor they go, and the 7 altars that are there have 7 sacrifices placed on them and the whole useless effort begins all over again.

### **READ NUMBERS 24 all**

Balak thinks, maybe the 3rd time will be the charm but it was not to be so; Balaam is starting to catch on. Finally recognizing that the Lord is pleased to bless Israel, Balaam ceased his divinations and looking for omens. Wherever this exact place was that they went to, Balak and Balaam could apparently see most of the Israeli encampment; surely this is what Balak had in mind because as everyone in those days understood, you can only curse what you can see.

What happens next is a bit different than before. Up to now, we are told that the Lord God literally put words into Balaam's mouth. But this time, the Spirit of God rests upon Balaam and so Balaam speaks not what God has told him to speak, but what Balaam now knows to be the truth and the reality. Do you see the difference? What we have occurring with the presentation of the 3rd Oracle is a little more of what we find in the New Testament whereby it is a man who has God's Spirit upon him teaching a lesson or addressing a problem, and doing the teaching and/or instructing in his own words. Before it was as though the Lord was literally either controlling Balaam's mouth, or whispering into Balaam's ear each and every sound and utterance Balaam was to make; there was no room for an ad lib.

Therefore (and please hear this) particularly as concerns the Apostles of the New Testament we don't get perfect words, but we do get perfect principles. Each of the Apostles' personalities is reflected in what they are saying, and the words they speak reflect their own minds. Now the Lord taught their minds so what they speak as theological principle is absolute truth. But that doesn't mean that they explain it in astounding ways.

Jesus Christ spoke in astounding ways. Yeshua HaMashiach spoke words that were so powerful, perfect and poignant that men marveled and went slack-jawed at them. It was declared that, "no man has ever spoken like this." The Apostles were not as articulate as Jesus because they were not God as is Our Savior. Yeshua could transcend the unexplainable and make it understandable to those "who had ears to listen" (a phrase He used often).

I take this momentary detour because I want you to understand how incorrect it is to hang on Paul or Peter's every word as though they were Jesus speaking. To dissect their sentences and to even pretend that their words were outside and above their context and their culture is what has led to widely divergent doctrines within the Church. Especially the highly-trained Rabbi Paul had the difficult job of attempting to explain to Jews that although the Torah remained fully intact, the advent of Yeshua elevated its meaning to an ever higher plane. To the gentiles he tried to explain heavenly things. To non-Hebrew people who did not have the

benefit of growing up among God's people, Paul spoke things that these gentiles knew nothing of, but any Jewish child would have known it because they started studying Torah at 5 or 6 years old. It would be like trying to teach Algebra to students who had never even learned basic math. And, then for Jew and gentile alike Paul attempted to define just what all that the coming of Messiah meant and how to apply it to their lives. Paul went through difficult gyrations in trying to form phrases and thoughts to explain what mere words cannot; things that we all still struggle with. Things like what actually happens at our Salvation, what is eternal security, what place does our works and deeds have within our relationship with God. Yet that was his difficult divine assignment. Unlike the Old Testament Prophets or like Balaam (who at first had the Lord quite literally place the precise divine words into his mouth) Paul's words were generally his own although God inspired them.

So in the saga of Balaam we see both sides of the coin: we see examples of inspiration and examples of revelation. On the one side we see the OT type of prophet who has God's words put into his mouth by means of direct and conscious revelation from the Lord. On the other we have the NT type of Prophet, the **teacher** of the Word; a word (a kind of Scripture, if you would) that has already been given to man by others who came before him; or are a result of things the Lord has taught to him; a teacher whose mind is inspired by perfect Godly truth but whose words are his own and therefore not perfectly precise.

All that I just told about this being Balaam's word from his own mind are confirmed in verse 3 when it begins, "...this is the speech (or word) of Balaam.....of a man whose eyes have been opened.....of him who hears Yehoveh's words..." Some of our Bibles, like the CJB, will say in verse 4 that these are the words of "one who has fallen". That really gives us the wrong idea because among evangelicals that means "one who has sinned"; and what this really means is "one who has fallen prostrate before the Lord" in worship.

Later in verse 4 we harken back to before Moses; to a time before the Lord told us His personal formal name. It goes back to a time when men knew God as El Shaddai. Our CJB has it right; most versions will say "almighty" or some such thing. Remember we now know (due to very recent findings) that El Shaddai means "god of the mountain"; and of course that is the exact context of our story at this point. After all this is the 3rd mountain peak Balaam has been escorted to that he might put a curse onto Israel.

The next several verses have Balaam declaring how pleased the Lord is with Israel; how powerful they are in Him. They will be even more abundant than they are now, and that the Lord will never cease to watch over them and bless them. And in verse 9 we get the message that has often been repeated in this class and ought to be repeated every day among the Church: Blessed are they who bless you and cursed are they who curse you. I've heard it said that it is a misuse of scripture to apply the "blessed are they who bless you and cursed are they who curse you" as a demand upon the Church to care for Israel and the Jewish people because it only applied to Abraham's immediate family and Israel wasn't even created yet. But clearly here those same words applies directly to the entire nation of Israel, does it not? There can be no doubt to whom the protected group is (Israel) and the warning is directed towards (gentiles) So write this verse number down somewhere for the next time someone tries to dispute this with you.

Well King Balak is now very angry. He glares at Balaam, slaps his hands together in disgust and tells Balaam to leave; and that Balaam will indeed depart empty handed because he did not do what he was hired to do, curse Israel. Understand: this is a terribly serious blow to Balak. He will now have to fight Israel (if he determines to fight them at all) without the aid of Israel being weakened by means of their being cursed and/or abandoned by their god.

But just as it seemed that it couldn't get any worse for King Balak, it does. For not only doesn't Balaam curse, but also bless, Moab's enemies, Balaam goes on to describe the rather unpleasant fate that awaits the people of Moab and other gentiles in the Trans-Jordan and in the Land of Canaan. Again the words are Balaam's but he is inspired of God to say them.

The words that come have wonderful Messianic hope in them, and are to take place well into the future. Along with it is a prophecy of Israel's soon-coming military victories. It is a key Biblical principle that often when prophecy is pronounced it happens not once, but twice, even three times. It happens in the near future, and again in the far future, and can happen at an intermediate time; and this is especially so as pertains to prophecies concerning the coming of Messiah. And so we get words that are familiar to us: ".....a star rises from Jacob, a scepter comes forth from Israel.." Kings are often referred to as stars in the ancient Middle East. This king from Jacob will inflict grave harm on the residents of Moab (today, we are speaking of the Kingdom of Jordan). Edom will be taken prisoner. Amalek will be wiped out forever.

Verse 17 gives us a bit of a problem in trying to identify just who this "Seth" or "Shet" is. Newest scholarship thinks this should be translated as Shut.....s-h-u-t. Certainly this is not referring to the immediate family of Adam and Eve. Rather there are some recent findings of Egyptian documents that speak of a people in the area of Moab around this same time frame that are called the "shutu"; almost certainly they is what is being referred to.

In verse 18, Seir and Edom are identified as one place since Seir is located within Edom.

Now beginning in verse 20 things shift just a bit; whereas the Israeli military was the cause of the demise of Edom and Moab and Shut, the demise of the listed several nations in general are NOT ascribed to military action by the Hebrews. Therefore, we are to take this as divine judgment brought about by some other means, such as other nations. Most of the names of peoples and places used here are difficult to identify: Kittim is thought to be an island in the Mediterranean Sea. Asshur may or may not mean the Assyrian Empire, although Asshur will be used later to definitely indicate Assyria (modern day Iraq). Probably this is a small tribe that lived for a time in the Negev.

It is currently thought that the Kittim are very likely an earlier name for the Philistines; and that these same people also go by the generic name of Sea Peoples as they come from the West, by means of the Mediterranean Sea. And, around 1200 B.C. Egyptians records indicate that the Sea Peoples attacked on the coastal plain of Canaan, then moved south and attacked Eber who lived in the upper part of the Sinai. So, very likely this is prophesying the coming of the ferocious Philistines, who would be a terrible bother to all of their neighbors and eventually to Israel.

The saga of Balaam and Balak ends with them parting company and each heading back home.

I would like to conclude this week with a thought for us all to take with us as we leave; one that I know many of you already accept but others aren't so sure. I think that the saga of Balaam and Balak is a prophetic tale of the gentile church. Balaam is a gentile. He is a spiritual man; in fact he's a God-fearer; that is he absolutely believes in and pays attention to the God of Israel. He hears from the God of Israel and knows the God of Israel. Yet he cannot bring himself to dismiss his long heritage of gentile traditions and customs that are so at odds with the Torah and other Scriptural commands of Yehoveh.

Balaam is a spiritually oriented gentile who knows Israel has a powerful God, and he has been given personal instruction from this God on what his relationship is to be with Israel (a relationship of uniting with them and blessing them based on God's covenants). God makes it clear to Balaam that He has already blessed Israel (it's a done deal) and as such it cannot be overturned by any man or gentile nation. And God will NEVER cease to see Israel as a blessed people. He will never permanently curse Israel, and He will oppose anyone who tries to curse His people.

God tells Balaam that Israel has a glorious future ahead of them BECAUSE they are blessed of God. Balaam says that he wants to die in the righteousness that the people of Israel have been given by Yehoveh.

And yet we find Balaam over and over again being warned off by Yehoveh as he journeys to Moab to do service to God's enemy, the King of Moab. Somehow there is this intellectual disconnect (Balaam describes it as a blindness that finally went away) whereby he just couldn't grasp that he cannot do service for a gentile nation whose intent is to weaken or harm Israel, and at the same time properly honor and be in harmony with the God of Israel. But that didn't stop him from trying on numerous occasions.

Balaam is an amazing model of the gentile dominated Church. Do you see it? The mainstream institutional Church says that Israel no longer has a glorious future, instead that glorious future now belongs to the gentile Church. The most ubiquitous and accepted Church doctrines say that God has abandoned Israel, rejected His people for all time, cursed them and blessed we gentile Believers in their stead. And the Church is so horribly wrong on this. Brothers and sisters in Christ it is utter self-destructive foolishness to think that we can do anything but work to actively bless Israel. Believers have not always had a clear-cut opportunity to do so, but we do now. Israel was not reborn as a nation until a mere 60 years ago, so there was no nation of Israel to love and defend. Obviously during the centuries of Jewish dispersion (especially prior to the rebirth of Israel) it should have been the Church's unequivocal duty to stand with them and befriend those Jewish families when they needed us the most, but we did not.

We must never assist or lend moral support and thus strengthen Israel's sworn enemies (as Balaam intended to do) and call it even handed or loving and kind, and think that somehow this is not cursing Israel. Balaam wasn't going to personally harm Israel, he was merely going to assist Israel's enemy (Moab) and then go home. God told him that if he did, He'd have to kill him.

We can't send supplies and money to the Palestinians, or apply political pressure upon Israel on their behalf, and then somehow claim that the God of the Bible sanctions this as a worthy and holy cause. We must not join with the secular world to push Israel into dividing the land that was covenanted to them by the Lord, or insist that Israel deed to the Muslims as their capital the very place our Messiah will again set foot when He returns from Heaven, or allow Islam to maintain a pagan shrine and worship center where the Temple of God once existed and will again, and then say that because our heartfelt intent is peace therefore doing all these things must be right in Our Lord's eyes.

If Balaam can wake up and see the light, then so can the Church. If Balaam can finally understand that Israel is not like the gentile nations, that God is not a human who changes his mind, that when he makes a promise or a covenant He will fulfill it and that the Lord Himself will curse anyone who curses His special people, Israel, then so can our brethren finally understand that. Let's do our part to see to it that it happens, soon.