

Numbers 23

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[0 : 00] If you turn with me back to the portion of Scripture we read in the book of Numbers, in chapter 23, and at verse 9 and 10, we find the words, From the rocky peaks I see them, from the heights I view them.

I see people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations. Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel?

Let me die the death of the righteous and may my end be like theirs. When Moses was sent to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, he had to face Pharaoh as his adversary.

Pharaoh was the focus of the opposition to the purposes of God. Here we've read of a situation that occurred 38 years later.

The years of wandering in the wilderness are coming to an end. The people are on the point of crossing the Jordan and seizing the land of promise.

[1 : 18] And at this point there arises another adversary of Israel. If Pharaoh represented more the opposition of the state to the people of God, Balaam represents rather the spiritual battle that surrounds the well-being of God's people.

Previously, Moses was called on to play a key role under God in the conflict that took place in Egypt with Pharaoh.

But on this occasion, it appears that the Israelites were unaware of the spiritual conflict that was going on until later. In the period covered by these chapters just before the entry into the land of promise, much went on in a very short period of time.

Not just Balaam's coming and uttering his oracles, oracles of blessing that he was forced to utter.

But not long after this, there occurs an incident in which Balaam's advice was instrumental in turning the Israelites away from the Lord at Baal-peor.

So that a plague struck the Israelite camp. And then again, some little time after that, Balaam himself was captured. And we are told of his death at the hands of Israel when they took vengeance on the Midianites.

[2 : 54] And it's certainly clear that by the time that happens in Numbers 31, Moses, we don't know how, but Moses has got to know what has been happening with Balaam.

Moses has got to know about the spiritual conflict that's going on and about Balaam's involvement in it. But here we're looking at an earlier situation where the people of God themselves are not aware of this spiritual battle.

And we're told about Balaam. He wasn't a minor figure. We know he made a considerable impact on the people of his day.

One evidence for that is the fact that a temple has been found, a temple that was built some centuries later than this, but on the shattered plaster that fell off the walls of the temple, it seemed to have fallen down in an earthquake.

There have been found records of other oracles that Balaam told, that the people had treasured, and had written on the temple walls in black and red ink.

[4 : 11] Balaam was a big figure on the religious scene of the day. He had a widespread reputation as a prophet whose word could effectively bless, and whose word could effectively curse.

I know, says Balak, I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed.

Balaam was a trafficker in the spirit world.

He was a craftsman engaging with the supernatural. And that's why Balak, king of Moab, along with the Midianite elders, sent for him over such a long distance.

Moabites, Midianites apparently at this time also, were located at the south of the Dead Sea. And they send up to the river, to the Euphrates, where it flows through northern Syria, 400 miles away,

to get this man.

He was the outside expert, who was going to be jettied in. Well, it was a donkey he came on, but that was the current equivalent of the expert jettied in.

[5 : 25] You see, Balak, the king of Moab, knew that military opposition to Israel hadn't worked. Sihon, king of the Amorites, Og, king of Bashan, they'd both tried it, and they'd both been defeated.

And so Balak was going to turn the tables in Israel by operating at the spiritual level, through the services of this renowned soothsayer.

And of course, as an expert, Balaam would get well paid for his services. And we know that that's what got Balaam really interested. He loved the wages of wickedness.

Now, I read quite a bit of Scripture. There are many aspects to it that are worthy of attention. But this evening, there's just two main features that I want to explore with you.

And the first of these focuses on this figure of Balaam. Because here we have a clear instance of Scripture, in Scripture, of how someone can use religious language, of how someone can possess true religious knowledge, of how someone can even be used by God to present the truth, and how all these privileges fall short of salvation.

[6 : 57] It's possible for someone to present themselves as very pious, very religious, doing all the right things, saying all the right things, and yet being far from fellowship with God.

And the story of Balaam, one lesson from it, is a very solemn warning for us as individuals. Lest we mistake, either in ourselves or in others, a veneer of piety for the reality.

Lest we make the mistake of thinking that religiosity, being well acquainted with the things of religion, is in fact the genuine article.

Jesus Himself said, Many will say to Me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?

Then I will tell them plainly, I never knew you. Away from Me, you evildoers. There's a warning for us to test the claims of others who present themselves as spokesmen from God.

[8 : 27] Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

And that testing is to be done on the basis of the truths of God's Word. It's not by feeling, not by outward appearance, not by plausibility, not by the reputation that someone has.

The test is, where do they stand in relation to the whole counsel of God? Consider Balaam.

He's a man who is prepared to make the claim, you have it back there in verse 18 of chapter 22, to the Lord my God.

He makes this claim. I'm in relationship. Not just with God, but with the Lord, Jehovah, Yahweh, my God.

[9 : 38] And time and again, he piously asserts, I'll not do anything, big or little, great or small, if it goes beyond the commands of my God.

If you listen to Balaam, at one level, you can be mightily impressed. Here is someone taking great care not to offend God.

But if you listen to his words at another level, you have the unwarranted claims of an imposter. He's approached to curse Israel.

It's known that their God is Yahweh, the Lord, Jehovah. And Balaam has an international reputation as a religious expert. Mention any God to him and he'll say, oh, I know him.

Mention any God, I know him well. We are on speaking terms. Got to be very careful with this God. You have got to deal very carefully with him because he's powerful.

[10 : 53] And all the time the man's working out how much money he can make out of the situation. He'll say, the Lord, my God, but he'd say that of any God you cared to mention to him.

He's not talking in terms of an exclusive covenant relationship. He's not saying, I have utter heart loyalty to this God. I have accepted his word.

I live in terms of what he says I should do in every respect. No, this man's the religious expert. He's the religious expert who will not lose face when he's challenged about his knowledge.

You see it amongst people. Someone claims to know a lot about motor cars or a lot about wine or a lot about some particular interest and you go to them with an awkward question.

You go to them with something and they don't really know but they'll never let on because they're the expert and they don't want to lose face. Here's Balaam. He may use the name of the Lord.

[12:02] The covenant name. I am that I am. But the narrator of this incident and that's Moses are quietly exposes Balaam because notice how often he talks about God.

In chapter 22 verse 9 it's not the Lord came to Balaam but God came to Balaam. In verse 10 Balaam said to God. In verse 12 God said to Balaam.

It's again the same in verse 20 that night God came. In verse 22 God was very angry. In the following chapter God met with him in verse 4.

The person, Moses, as he tells this story is very carefully, quietly, but carefully saying, yes, there was something real went on but it wasn't within the bond of the covenant.

It wasn't within a true relationship with the Lord. But you say to me, how could that be? Because wasn't it in fact the case that Balaam only uttered what the Lord told him to say?

[13:18] Wasn't it the case that really you're misjudging him because he's a man who's very careful and no matter what else you can say about him, he just spoke and repeatedly spoke even at the cost of his reward from Balak only what the Lord had spoken to him.

But as the story very vividly brings out, you can say exactly the same of Balaam's donkey. Here's this religious expert.

He's been given permission to go with these foreign envoys but we're told in chapter 22 and verse 22 God was very angry when he went.

Perhaps you can get the flavour of that better if you translate it God's anger grew hot as he was going. Balaam had been given permission to go but on the journey something was happening that made God even more angry with Balaam and it seems to be a situation that was deteriorating.

The further Balaam travelled something got wrong. God's anger grew hot as he was going as Balaam was travelling.

[14:42] It's not stated in the text but it seems very clear to me that we're not far off the total picture if we base it on the rest of the evidence of scripture that as Balaam is riding on that donkey he's saying I fiddled out of God permission to go at first he said no but I managed to persuade him and now I'm going what can I now do to turn this situation to my advantage how can I get profit out of this situation.

He wasn't travelling on a mission for God's glory. He was going for his own profit. He's going to coerce God. And you can see that spirit coming out in verse 4 of chapter 23.

When God again meets with Balaam and he says I've prepared seven altars and on each altar I've offered a bull and a ram. Look what I've done.

Aren't you impressed? Now will you do something for me? The story in chapter 22 is told to mock this religious expert.

Here's this religious expert with an international reputation for being in touch with the spirit world for being able to bless effectively because of God's order what he says of being able to curse effectively because when he goes against someone the gods reinforce his request and this religious expert isn't able to see the angel of the Lord standing in his path not once not twice but three times and his donkey can.

[16:31] In the ancient world and in our modern world donkeys are not credited with being naturally wise and sagacious. The donkey is presented as slow witted contrary sort of animal.

But here's this slow witted contrary animal able to see the angel of the Lord and Balaam the man who claims to be in touch with the spirit world can't see anything at all until the Lord opens his eyes. what does that tell us about the real sort of relationship between this prophet and the Lord? Still not satisfied?

Still sort of saying but he did become the Lord's spokesman. Didn't God meet with him and use him? That's true. God did. But there's an old saying the Lord can strike a mighty blow with a crooked stick and there was no more crooked stick than Balaam.

In Luke chapter 9 verses 1 and 2 we're told that when Jesus had gathered the twelve together he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.

[18:05] The commission given to the twelve. And he didn't at the end stop and say but sorry not you Judas. Judas went out under that commission and you couldn't have told which exorcisms were his and which were from the other apostles.

You couldn't have told from the word he spoke in preaching the kingdom that here was one whose heart was not right. If you're wanting to see the spiritual descendants of Balaam look at Judas.

Consider again the catalogue in 1 Corinthians 13 speaking in tongues of men and of angels having prophetic powers understanding all mysteries and all knowledge and what does it all amount to? Nothing at all if there be not love. Nothing at all if there be not a right inner disposition a heart disposition that has been implanted and impressed by the Holy Spirit of God.

Yes the Lord was pleased to deliver messages through Balaam. But it was the Lord who put the word in Balaam's mouth. That's the language of verse 5.

[19 : 33] The Lord put a message in Balaam's mouth. The same Lord who'd opened the mouth of the donkey so that it could speak.

These words are divinely authorized and we can look at the content of them with profit. We'll do so for a little while in just a second. But the question is did these words even from his own lips profit Balaam?

He uttered them but had they spoken to his own heart? Had they made a difference? Oh you might think so. He seems to be impressed by the presence of Israel.

He utters the desire let me die the death of the righteous and may my end be like theirs. He recognizes that these people of a status and the sight of God.

His wish is that he would end up the way they are. But it's not accompanied by the heart desire to live the way they're living right now.

[20 : 38] He has divorced the future from the present. His wish is utterly futile because he cannot participate in the blessing of the people unless he will surrender his heart in loyal submission to the Lord.

And he won't do that because his heart is dominated by one thing money. The love of money has such a hold on his heart that there's no room left for the Lord there.

He just sees this as an opportunity to exploit to his personal profit. And those who live that way however much they may wish to attain heaven however much they may wish to die the death of the righteous cannot do so because they haven't here and now let go of this world and its allure and given their hearts to the one who alone can conduct them into eternal glory.

Balaam a man used by God but a man whose heart was far from him. But there is a second thing I must just mention.

Balaam's message its content it's a divinely authorized message so that quite apart from who the messenger is we can listen profitably to the message.

[22 : 21] And in particular I draw your attention to the characterization he gives here of the people of God. At one level this is Balaam's message.

He's the one who stood on the barren heights. He's the one who viewed the people from a distance. It's his message but it's the message the Lord has commanded mandated that he deliver.

And do notice the change that occurs there in verse 5 of chapter 23. It's not God put the message but the Lord the covenant God. He is now speaking as the one who protects and provides for his people.

And in that capacity he puts these words in Balaam's mouth. Words of blessing and not words of cursing. this is the message of the covenant king which he permits Balaam to speak.

And the covenant king is the one who seeks the blessing of his people. Compels the prophet to utter words that will bring him no commission from Balak. But they're true words because they reflect the covenant status of the people.

[23 : 35] We have here the truth. that to earn his soothsayers fee Balaam attempted time and again to curse the people but he was impotent before the power of the Lord.

God's blessing is irrevocable. Demonic powers and pagan incantations are useless in the face of the objective blessing of the covenant God of Israel.

What is happening here is nothing less than a satanic attack through Balaam that is countered and defeated by the intervention of the Lord himself.

Oh, there had been many failures on the part of Israel. They were going to fail again in the very near future. but the Lord had claimed them and he wasn't giving up on his claim.

He was still working with them. He was still shaping them. He was still drawing them to himself. He was doing them good and he would let no power in heaven or on earth annul his purpose.

[24 : 52] And as the prophet looks at them, he sees a people who live apart. A people who dwell alone.

It's an indication at one level of security. There's no enemy close to them able to surprise them of a sudden. And they also live apart because they are different.

distinct from those around them. And that focus on the separateness of the Lord's people isn't a matter of racial difference.

It's not a matter of the moral goodness of the people. It's a divinely imposed separation that requires dedication to the Lord.

They had been chosen out of the nations so that they could dedicate themselves to the service of this Lord. And the service was one of imitation.

[26 : 03] The Lord had said to the people, you shall be holy, for I the Lord am holy. And there was Balaam on his mountaintop, able to take a bird's eye view of the people.

people. And he was impressed. And that was a proper reaction. And that's why the Lord permitted him to record it in this way. And that's why the Lord ensured that this message was transmitted on to the Israelites through Moses.

They were a people enjoying divine blessing. Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel? The fourth part because the Israelites, as they travelled through the wilderness, their camp was divided into four with the Levites and the ark and the tabernacle in the centre.

He's just looking at the way the camp was set out there as he could see it from the mountaintop and saying, who can possibly count them? This is part of covenant blessing. The Lord had said to Abraham, your offspring will be as the stars of heaven and as the sand on the seashore for number. And even the pagan, worldly, money-loving Balaam was able to see that. He was drawn to desire some share of divine blessing for himself.

[27 : 30] And these things aren't confined to events thousands of years ago. The promises are still being worked out in God's covenant purpose through Christ Jesus.

Christ Jesus brings many sons to glory. and the writer to Hebrews presents him as making his own, as Jesus making his own the prophetic words.

Behold, I and the children God has given me. And this evening we're not called on to climb up some steep mountain to view the people of God.

But we are invited to use our spiritual perception and to envisage the panorama of the people of Jesus Christ, whom he has claimed for himself from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.

We're called upon to envisage the panorama of the grandeur and the extent of God's kingdom. We have a great Savior. His purposes are not limited.

[28 : 37] His dominion is not constrained. And even as we just confine ourselves to the level of this world and look around us, consider all those who are bound in fellowship with him through their common loyalty to the one Lord who has saved them.

The world dismisses the church, despises the church, and the people of God have constantly to set themselves apart from the world, not falling into its way of assessment, not falling into its mode of dismissal of the people of God, but to count and to wonder in something that even exceeds the way in which this Balaam was enabled, to wonder at the extent of God's purposes.

don't dismiss the purposes of God as shown in the church that he has gathered.

There may be flaws, there certainly are, this side of glory, but it is the Lord's people, it is the Lord's purpose, and he is not going to let any power in heaven or in earth, for a straight his purpose for those whom he has separated to himself.

Think further of the security of God's people. There's Balaam desperate to curse the people of God, and yet he's constrained to say, how can I curse those whom God has not cursed?

[30 : 19] How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced? And that security is not some guarantee that's become time expired. So often the guarantees of this world, when something breaks down, you go and look for them and find they expired a month earlier.

Not so with this word. This is the security the Lord affords to his people in every age and generation. As he said to Peter, I tell you that you are Peter the rock, and on this rock, this rock of your confession as to who I am, I will build my church and the gates of Hades, all the forces and planning of the powers of darkness and of hell, will not overcome it.

You can't despair of the outcome for an institution that has the guarantee that even the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

A guarantee underwritten by Christ himself, protected by his care, sustained by heavenly resources. We're called on to rejoice in it.

More than that, we're called on to share in it, to build on the rock that Peter confessed. You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

[31 : 47] One last thought. Look at the closing words of verse 9. I see people who do not consider themselves one of the nations.

Balaam, a few chapters, is going to be instrumental in bringing tragedy on Israel. Because he's going to plot to get them to forget their unique status.

He's going to plot to get them to act like the other nations. They're going to fall before the lure of crass spiritual seduction.

The people of God undermine their own interests, their own enjoyment of the covenant when they forget the norms their God has set for their behavior.

That was the problem back in Balaam's day. It remains the problem still. If the church becomes like the world, thinks like the world, lives like the world, has the same aspirations and life targets as the world, then it has corrupted itself.

[33 : 11] And the Lord will act against it in anger to root out the ill to preserve for himself a people. The challenge is to live in terms of this vision Balaam had of people who do not consider themselves one of the nations, who recognize that they are apart from the peoples of this world, who recognize that they have to live as those who live apart from the standards and the aspirations and the thinking and the thought patterns of the peoples.

It is the challenge to spiritual carefulness. We no longer possess a temple as a spiritual structure, but the people of God collectively are the temple which God indwells.

And that requires distinctiveness and separation. Paul cited the Old Testament, therefore come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord.

Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will receive you as an honoured guest. I will welcome you into my family and enable you to partake of its blessings.

Are you part of the temple of the living God? Do you know God's welcome into his family? Then you must consider yourself to be part of those who are not one of the nations.

[34 : 48] We must be willing to renounce the lifestyle of this world and to live in a way that pleases our heavenly Father. The vision that Balaam has of the people of God, an expansive vision, a vision of security, ultimately depends our enjoyment of these truths ultimately depends on our willingness to accept the Lord's requirement to come out and be separate and touch no unclean thing.

I leave you with the challenge. Are you ready for that? Have you seen the extent of the commitment Christ requires?

And can you accept that in all its foibles because you see all that he has done for you? let us pray.

Lord, we still live in days when the adversary goes around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. And so often we live unaware of the challenge that is around us.

We give thee thanks, O Lord, for the many occasions on which thou hast protected thy people both individually and collectively even when we have known nothing about it at all, when we have been unaware of the forces battling around us.

[36 : 32] But, O Lord, we also have to confess that there are many forces of which we are aware. Day by day they seek to draw us astray. And therefore we ask that thou wouldst give to us the strength to stand firm, to be prepared to be different for Jesus' sake, to acknowledge the standards of the word of truth and the commands our Lord has given us, and to acknowledge them not only in our thinking and in our speech, but also in our action.

None of these we can do in our own strength. And so we come pleading for renewed vision to see the grandeur of thy purposes, for renewed encouragement drawn from the fact that we have a Savior in Jesus Christ, a Savior from whose grasp none of his sheep will ever be taken.

Help us, we pray, to live as those who are responsive to him, knowing his voice and heeding it. Give to us day by day a closer walk with our Lord, so that we might be found rejoicing now in his salvation and looking forward to perfect bliss hereafter, through all that he has done for us.

In his name, guide and save us into his eternal kingdom. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.