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Congregation: **First United Reformed Church**
Oak Lawn, Illinois
www.oaklawnurc.org/

Title: **The Star and Scepter of Christ the King**
Text: [Numbers 24:1-19 \(View\)](#)
Occasion: [Regular Sunday](#)
Topic: [The Incarnation](#)

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Order Of Worship (Liturgy)

(Selections from The Singing Church Hymnal)

89 (Red) – Jesus Came, the Heavens Adoring

RR 599 (Red) – Adoration of the Magi

116 (Red) - We Three Kings of Orient Are

119 (Red) – Tell Me the Story of Jesus

123 (Red) – Who Is He in Yonder Stall?

(For reading services: By changing the hymns and omitting the phrases in parenthesis, this sermon can be used any time of the year. The focus is on the Kingship of Christ as well as His incarnation).

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Pastor Ted Gray
 12/12/2021

“The Star and Scepter of Christ the King” Numbers 24:1-19; text: verse 17

Balaam and Balak are not common names today. But even you children know something about Balaam. After all, Balaam is well known for having a donkey that spoke to him. The donkey was used by the Lord to spare Balaam’s life and open his eyes to the power of God. But unfortunately, although he knew God is all powerful and eternal, he did not have saving faith in the eternal Christ.

The background is that Balaam was hired by Balak, king of Moab, to pronounce a curse on against Israel. Balak, along with all the Moabites were terrified of Israel. God was guiding Israel to the promised land. He had led them out of Egypt in dramatic fashion and

as they moved through the desert it was obvious that God was with them. There was the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. There were accounts of bread from heaven – manna – given to Israel to sustain them. God’s provision for Israel included water from the rock and quail to provide meat.

Balak and the Moabites had heard about these amazing events, as well as the discipline of the Lord. They knew that when the people disobeyed God, he disciplined them, for God disciplines those whom he loves. But what really terrified them was the way Israel had defeated Sihon the king of the Amorites and Og the king of Bashan. Both of those nations were neighbors to Moab; and both nations were located in the path that Israel needed to travel through to reach the promised land of Canaan. The Israelites asked for safe passage through those lands. Numbers 21:21 describes how messengers were sent to Sihon, king of the Amorites, saying: *“Let us pass through your country. We will not turn aside into any field or vineyard, or drink water from any well. We will travel along the King’s Highway until we have passed through your territory.”*

But Sihon refused to allow Israel to pass through the land of the Amorites. He mustered his entire army and went out to attack Israel, but God gave Israel a dramatic victory. Israel took over the land as, by God’s hand of protection, they moved toward the promised land. A similar devastating defeat overwhelmed Og, king of Bashan. Bashan also went out to attack Israel but was thoroughly defeated.

Do you see why Balak, king of Moab, was terrified? Two of his neighboring countries had been defeated by the Israelites, and now they were advancing on Moab. In futility, Balak wondered what he could do to protect himself and his country from Israel and the God who empowered and guided them.

In an effort to spare Moab, Balak hired Balaam to curse Israel. Balaam was a seer, which is similar to a fortune teller, sorcerer or diviner today. Just as those in the occult specialize in “spiritual matters” with a supposed ability to see the future and to contact the dead, so Balaam was known to have that type of occult, spiritual power. He was also a prophet, but he was a false prophet.

Balak reasoned that if he could get Balaam to curse Israel, then the God of Israel would not give them the power to destroy Moab. Balaam sought God, and the Lord gave him permission to meet with Balak. But the Lord commanded him to speak only the words that God put into his mouth. Consequently, each time Balak instructed Balaam to curse Israel, he blessed them instead. This happened three times, infuriating Balak and leading Balaam to pronounce his fourth oracle. That is the oracle we read in verse 15 to 19; it contains a prophecy that a great king would rise up out of the line of Jacob, out of Israel.

The King of Kings Revealed

This King would be revealed in the future. Our text, in verse 17, begins with these words of Balaam, *“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near.”* That prophecy, like so many other prophecies, has a dual application. It certainly applies to David. He was among the greatest kings of Israel; he was the greatest in conquering kingdoms and bringing judgment against the nations that opposed God and his people.

It was David, incidentally, who ultimately defeated and destroyed the Moabites in dramatic fashion as recorded in 2 Samuel 8:2. That verse describes how *“David also defeated the Moabites. He made them lie down on the ground and measured them off with a length*

of cord. Every two lengths of them were put to death, and the third length was allowed to live. So the Moabites became subject to David and brought him tribute."

But when God gave Balaam a glimpse of the future, it was not only David whom he saw, but the greater David, Jesus Christ. Jesus describes himself, in Revelation 22:16 as *"the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star."* And it was, of course, a bright, unusual and unique star that guided the wise men – the Magi – to the place where Jesus was. The wise men showed the truth of their name in that they recognized Jesus as the true King over all kings. They were not searching for a little baby, or for a young boy; they were searching for the King of Israel. They asked Herod, *"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."* (Matt. 2:2)

Jesus Christ is the true king of Israel. And Israel is not just a physical nation. The true Israel of God includes people from every nation and every tribe. It includes all those who like Abraham, believe in God and are justified by faith in the eternal Christ. Galatians 3, among other passages, makes that truth abundantly clear. Galatians 3:6 and 7: *"Consider Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham."* Galatians 3:29 assures us, *"If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise."* And Galatians 6:16 adds, *"Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God."*

And as the true and eternal King of his people, Jesus Christ has defeated – and will defeat completely – all the forces of evil. He will defeat and judge all who oppose him and his people; he will do so even more dramatically and powerfully than when David defeated the Moabites.

It may seem cruel when we read about David measuring off the Moabites and killing them. But the Moabites had opposed God and his people. Instead of turning to the Lord in repentance and faith, and instead of letting Israel pass through their land on the way to Canaan, they tried to destroy God's people. In other words, they brought judgment on themselves.

And the same will be true when Christ, the King of kings, will judge the world and bring judgment on those who have never repented of their sin. The Scripture explains it this way in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10, as it declares:

"God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you," - Paul writes to the Thessalonians and to us - "because you believed our testimony to you."

We live in a time where God's people are persecuted and martyred. Even in nations like the United States, where so far we have not faced physical persecution, Christians are ridiculed, slandered and increasingly oppressed. We see that in many spheres of society, including the political sphere. Legislation is enacted that harms Christians, derides the teaching of the Bible and advances the liberties and power of those who oppose God and his people.

Some professing Christians want to take matters into their own hands. They want to retaliate. And while we must speak up and actively counter evil with good, Romans 12 tells us not to take revenge:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:

*"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."*

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom. 12:17-21)

One reason why we are not to retaliate is because our sense of justice is always skewed and tainted by our sin. But our sinless Savior will judge the nations with perfect equity and righteousness. And he will judge them thoroughly; he will judge them not out of malice, but with a righteous judgment for their hatred of him and his people. Revelation 19:11-21 is one of many passages which describes the judgment to come. It does so with graphic imagery as it describes Christ the King as a rider on a white horse who judges all who oppose him and consigns them to *"the fiery lake of burning sulfur"*, which is the reality of an eternal hell.

The Scepter of Christ the King

That is what the scepter spoken about in Numbers 24:17 is ultimately pointing to. That scepter of power and judgment goes far beyond David to Jesus Christ, *"the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star."* He is not just a baby born in a manger. He is the one Psalm 2:9 speaks about when it declares that Christ will rule the nations with an iron scepter (a rod of iron). He will dash those who oppose him to pieces, shattering them as pottery falls and shatters, just as Psalm 2:9 describes.

We sing the familiar carol, *"Away in the Manger"*, which points to the wonderful and crucial truth that the eternal Christ took on human flesh and was born in a manger to save his people from their sin. But at Christmas, and always, we must see beyond the sentimental setting of a lowly manger to see what the wise men saw as they followed the star of the east. They looked for and saw the true King of kings and Lord of lords. He alone redeems sinners from their sin. And he will judge those who in hardness of heart refuse him. He will judge them with an eternal punishment.

The familiar song from Psalm 72, *"Christ Shall Have Dominion"*, addresses that: "Christ shall have dominion over land and sea, earth's remotest regions shall his empire be; they that wilds inhabit shall their worship bring, kings shall render tribute, nations serve our King." That too is a fitting Psalm for Christmas. The baby born in Bethlehem is the eternal Christ, truly God yet truly human, ruler over all people and all kingdoms. He shall have dominion!

We sing about the birth of Jesus with carols like "Silent Night! Holy Night! all is calm, all is bright." It is a beautiful carol and contains biblical truth. But the biblical account of Christmas – the biblical account of Jesus' birth – goes far beyond a quiet, serene night. The biblical account is an account of conflict. It brings about the death of innumerable baby boys. It forces Joseph and Mary to flee to

Egypt. It leads to a life of suffering for the man of sorrows, born in the manger. And it led ultimately to the cross of Calvary where *“For our sake (God) made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”* (2 Cor. 5:21)

But that is not what most people see at Christmas, is it? In the Christmas season, so many are like Balaam. He saw Christ from a distance, but never saw Him with the eye of saving faith. Instead, Balaam rebelled against the Lord. Because he could only speak what God allowed him to speak, he could not destroy Israel with a curse. He could not destroy them with hostility and military might. So because he had to bless them instead of curse them, did he leave Israel alone? Did he tell the Moabites to trust the God of Israel and open their land and their hearts to his people? Did he tell Balak to believe in the power of the eternal God who guided and empowered Israel?

Unfortunately, not. The very next chapter, Numbers 25, describes how Moab seduced Israel. It describes how *“the men began to engage in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices of their gods. ... And the Lord’s anger burned against them.”* (Num. 25:1, 3) Who encouraged them to do that? It was Balaam. In Revelation 2:14, Jesus himself speaks to the church at Pergamum and says, *“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.”*

Numerous other passages in the New Testament, as well as the Old Testament, describe how Balaam was a false prophet who did great damage to God’s people. And he did so by following the scheme of the devil. The devil loves to instill fear in God’s people. He uses persecution, taunts, ridicule and even martyrdom to intimidate the people of God. But when that doesn’t work, he uses seduction. Consider how many Christian leaders have fallen, not from the fear of persecution, but from the seductive allurements of the world that the devil packages so very attractively.

And that is why it is crucial, (in this advent season and always), to be like the wise men, and seek the true King of all kings. When they presented their gifts to Jesus they showed their wisdom, given to them by God’s grace. The gold represented the kingship of Jesus. The frankincense pointed to his high priesthood, that as incense rises, so through Christ our prayers rise up to the Father’s throne. And the myrrh pointed to his sacrificial death. When Jesus was crucified, you recall how Joseph of Arimathea asked for the body of Jesus. Along with Nicodemus, he wrapped the body of Jesus in a mixture of about 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes and placed it in the tomb. The Magi were truly wise. They recognized the true identity of Jesus Christ as the King of kings who is also the Great High Priest, the One who offered Himself as the only acceptable sacrifice for sinners.

Knowing Christ, But Not from a Distance

In the Advent season, many are like Balaam. They see Christ from a distance. They know that there is an account in the Bible about the birth of a great king. But instead of seeking him, as the wise men did, they get carried away in the materialism and false sentiment of a secular holiday.

By contrast, wise men – and wise women and boys and girls – by God’s grace, still seek Him. And we are called to do the same. 2 Peter 1 describes how Peter and the other writers of Scripture *“did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty”* (v. 16). Then he describes how *“we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the Morning Star rises in your hearts”* (v. 19).

He adds: *“Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation.”* That was certainly true for Balaam, and for every other prophet. *“For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit”* (vss. 20, 21).

As you hear the prophecies concerning Jesus Christ - not only those concerning his birth, which have been fulfilled, but also those concerning his second coming, which will be fulfilled - do you draw near to him in saving faith? By his grace and Holy Spirit’s power do you know Jesus Christ, not just from a distance, but intimately, deep within your heart, soul and mind?

It has been noted that the most important measurement is the 12 inches or so between our mind and our heart. You can know the truth of God’s Word in your mind, but if it is not in your heart it will stand to condemn you instead of save you. Mathew Henry points out, in his commentary on Numbers 24, *“(Balaam) had heard the words of God, which many do who neither heed them, nor hear God in them. He knew the knowledge of the Most High. A man may be full of the knowledge of God, yet utterly destitute of the grace of God.”*

By God’s grace and Spirit’s power may you and I know the truths concerning Israel’s eternal King, Jesus Christ, not only in our minds but in our hearts. And if you do know him in your heart as your Savior from sin and Lord of your life, are you building that relationship? Are you faithful in his Word throughout the week, as well as gathering with his people to worship and praise him on the Lord’s Day? Do you see past the secular holiday to Christ, reflecting not just on his first coming, but his second?

So may it be now, (in this Christmas season), and always! Amen.

Bulletin Outline:

“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.” – Numbers 24:17

“The Star and Scepter of Christ the King”

Numbers 24:15-19; text: v. 17

- I. Balaam was hired by Balak, king of Moab, to prophecy against Israel. Instead, Balaam blessed Israel (Num. 22:1-24:25), and saw a vision of Israel’s King. This king would be:
 - 1) Revealed in the future (17a, b)

2) Revealed as a star from Jacob (17c)

3) Crush the enemies of Israel with his scepter (a rod of iron, 17 d, e. f)

II. The prophecy relates to both David and to “The Greater David” Jesus Christ:

1) Jesus is *“the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star”* (Rev. 22:16)

2) He is the King whom the Magi sought, following a star (Matt. 2:2)

3) Christ is, and forever will be, victorious over sin, Satan, death, and all the enemies of God (19; Rev. 19:11-21)

III. Application: Many are like Balaam. He saw Christ from a distance, but never saw Him with the eye of faith. By contrast, wise men, women and children, by God’s grace and Spirit’s power, still seek Him; and we are called to do the same (2 Peter 1:19)

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