

## In the Wilderness | The Gospel in the Book of Numbers

### “Balaam and the Blessing”

Numbers 24.10ff

12.18.16

*Then Balak's anger burned against Balaam, and he struck his hands together; and Balak said to Balaam, "I called you to curse my enemies, but behold, you have persisted in blessing them these three times!"<sup>11</sup> "Therefore, flee to your place now. I said I would honor you greatly, but behold, the LORD has held you back from honor."<sup>12</sup> Balaam said to Balak, "Did I not tell your messengers whom you had sent to me, saying,<sup>13</sup> 'Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything contrary to the command of the LORD, either good or bad, of my own accord. What the LORD speaks, that I will speak.'<sup>14</sup> "And now, behold, I am going to my people; come, and I will advise you what this people will do to your people in the days to come."<sup>15</sup> He took up his discourse and said, "The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, And the oracle of the man whose eye is opened,<sup>16</sup> The oracle of him who hears the words of God, And knows the knowledge of the Most High, Who sees the vision of the Almighty, Falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered.<sup>17</sup> "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; A star shall come forth from Jacob, A scepter shall rise from Israel, And shall crush through the forehead of Moab, And tear down all the sons of Sheth.<sup>18</sup> "Edom shall be a possession, Seir, its enemies, also will be a possession, While Israel performs valiantly.<sup>19</sup> "One from Jacob shall have dominion, And will destroy the remnant from the city."<sup>20</sup> And he looked at Amalek and took up his discourse and said, "Amalek was the first of the nations, But his end shall be destruction."<sup>21</sup> And he looked at the Kenite, and took up his discourse and said, "Your dwelling place is enduring, And your nest is set in the cliff.<sup>22</sup> "Nevertheless Kain will be consumed; How long will Asshur keep you captive?"<sup>23</sup> Then he took up his discourse and said, "Alas, who can live except God has ordained it?"<sup>24</sup> "But ships shall come from the coast of Kittim, And they shall afflict Asshur and will afflict Eber; So they also will come to destruction."<sup>25</sup> Then Balaam arose and departed and returned to his place, and Balak also went his way.*

We've been reading and teaching through the Book of Numbers this fall. Numbers is the fourth book in the Bible. In Hebrew it's called "ba-midbar" meaning, "in the wilderness". It's the story of the Israelites journey toward the Promised Land... out of Egypt and slavery... to Mount Sinai (for a year) and then on to the Promised Land.

It's the history of the Big Detour...a trip of 40 days is stretched to 40 years...

At the center of the book... are seven rebellions, which are the reason why this first generation (including Moses, Miriam and Aaron) never entered the Land. All their resistance to God stems from their refusal to trust Him ...a refusal to live by faith.

As we said last week, the whole book is a post-mortem analysis of unbelief...it's a study of THE worst cancer of the spiritual life – failing to trust God and His good purposes. That's the terminal disease of the spiritual life... Numbers makes that point.

Today, we see a man who IN SOME WAY has gotten that message and has experienced the grace of God BY FAITH (the way you get grace is BY FAITH) and this pagan magician, Balaam, has experienced that (grace by faith) AND we see another man who is a stranger to God, a stranger to grace... a spiritual man but a man who is fearful, angry, exasperated and desperately trying to control what CAN'T BE CONTROLLED.

And in the story we learn something about God's plan for planet Earth. Let's look at: 1) The Frustrated Controller 2) The Favored Nation and 3) The Once and Future King

When we "tuned in last week"... the controller, Balak, king of Moab, was nervous. He was seeing the Israelites fruitful and multiplied (Gen 1.28) and ready to take the Land God had promised them...and Balak was afraid. And BEING a spiritual person, he sought a spiritual remedy.

SO, the controlling king summoned Balaam the pagan magician to bring the forces to bear on the Israelites, to drive a wedge between YHWH (the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) – to separate the Israelites from their God.

I won't recount the whole sermon from last week but suffice it to say, Balaam, the prophet/magician, was arrested on the road and had a real encounter with God, an EPIPHANY that convinced him NOT to try to control this God – that YHWH is untamed and no more controllable than the planets or the tides.

And after that experience Balaam journeyed ON with a new perspective and now he's arrived in Moab and consulted with Balak the king and he tried to relate the lesson he learned in his spiritual awakening... but the king, Balak, has NOT had his own awakening and he's still in that "control mode" (karma) ... and still convinced that IF YOU JUST WORK IT THE RIGHT WAY...you can control the future and control the forces...and control GOD!

And now, Balaam the converted magician, the former karma-man...is telling Balak, “Nope! I’ve learned my lesson – you can’t manipulate this God. He does whatever He wants” (Ps 115.3) And Balak the controller-karma-king... he says to the practitioner, “Oh...sure...no problem! I understand...but uh...I just want to honor you... you know pay you handsomely so what say we just go through the motions...ok?”

But Balaam really did learn something on that road...and from the donkey so he says what he’ll repeat like 4 times in these chapters, “And Am I able to speak whatever I want? I’m telling you, I will ONLY say the word that God puts in my mouth.” (22.38)

But the controller-karma-king insists so they go through all the religious motions (all the trappings!) – he makes the magician look at the Israelites – like “Look how MANY there are! They have to be stopped!...Get mad, Balaam...get fired up!”

And then God gives Balaam the words and they... sound more like a blessing than a curse. AND Balak the controller-karma-king... is frustrated and angry and makes him do it again...takes him to another vantage point, “See? Can you see them better from here? Are you stoked? Are you passionate? Are you INTO it...if you’re really INTO it/sincere, it’ll work!”

But once again Balaam blesses the Israelites and says, “Look king... when God has blessed these people, I can’t revoke it...He’s not that kind of god!” (23.20)

And now Balak the controller-karma-king is really frustrated...and says, “Enough! This isn’t working! Just say nothing!” (If you can’t something NOT NICE – then don’t say nothing at all!)

But ya’ know he’s desperate...he’s controlling...and all he knows is “you gotta work it”... So again, he tries to get the magician fired up/excited...takes him to get another view of how MANY there are...but once again, Balaam (who is NO LONGER a karma-man) Balaam blesses the Israelites in glowing terms... and you can imagine Balak’s frustrated face!

“Nooooooooo!...How stupid ARE you?!...CURSE! Not bless! Don’t they teach you this in magician’s school?”

And frustrated...angry...burning... clapping his hands in OUTRAGE... “I hired you to curse my enemies... and I was gonna really reward you ...but this YHWH has ruined it...now...no soup for YOU! Nothin’!”

And that's when this pagan magician...gives us a kind of theology of "what in the world is God doing?"

To paraphrase v. 12 "Balaam said to Balak, 'I told your messengers, even if Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I can't oppose the will of Israel's God. He doesn't respond to practitioners. He's not like the gods YOU know... HE'S UNIQUE and these are the people HE HAS DETERMINED TO BLESS ...and no one can curse what HE HAS BLESSED."

This is God's plan for the world – HE HAS COME DOWN TO ONE PEOPLE, an old couple from a pagan background...past child-bearing age and for nothing good in THEM but just to bless them, to show HIS STRENGTH through THEIR WEAKNESS... God came to Abraham and Sarah and said, 'I will bless you and make you a great nation' (AND THAT, O King, is what you're seeing out there...a great nation blessed by Abraham's God – fruitful and multiplied!)"

"God has said, "whoever blesses this nation will BE blessed and whoever curses the Israelites will BE cursed... I COULDN'T CURSE THEM IF I WANTED TO... this is God's great plan to bless the whole world – through the Israelites HE WILL REVEAL HIMSELF TO A WORLD IN DARKNESS...a world that thinks it all depends on US AND OUR ABILITY TO WORK IT... a world that doesn't know its right hand from its left (spiritually speaking) a world full of controlling karma kings like YOU...and me...people who need an eye-opening...and O King... I have had just such an experience!"

"I had the strangest experience on the way here! A donkey talked to me... and I'm different now. I'm not the Wizard of Oz that I used to be...I'm not a karma man who thinks I can 'work it'..."

I am now, (v. 15) "I am the man whose eye is opened...who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered... I came off my high horse (or at least of my low donkey!) and I fell, I bowed down..."

"I don't know everything but I do see something about God's method with the world...it has something to do with this people... A star shall come forth from Jacob, a scepter shall rise from Israel" (17)

You see, the Book of Numbers has human failing at its core...seven rebellions... BUT it has a happy ending when IN ANSWER TO THOSE SEVEN FAILINGS, GOD makes a pagan magician say seven times the phrase "and he took up his discourse... and he took up his discourse... and he

took up his discourse..." SEVEN TIMES IT'S REPEATED and I can't help think that God is saying, "As much as YOU are trying to mess it up COMPLETELY (7 rebellions – the number of completion) – as much as you are determined to curse yourselves... I AM THAT DETERMINED TO BLESS YOU...and My determination is stronger than yours!"

"A star will come forth from Jacob"... Israel fails... but out of Israel will come a King...the King of all Kings: "A star shall come forth from Jacob, a scepter shall rise from Israel" (24.17)

Who is this star and this scepter?... Well, it may be Moses's successor who will take the people into the Land (more about him on Christmas Eve – DON'T MISS THE EXCITING SEASON FINALE OF IN THE WILDERNESS DEC 24 at 6:00PM!) but many scholars Jewish and Christian see here a reference to David, the model king of Israel who spoke just like Balaam, "David the son of Jesse declares, the man who was raised on high declares, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel, the Spirit of the LORD spoke by me" (2 Sam 23.1-2) It could be David.

But for 2000 years the Christian Church has seen that this is a proleptic prophecy that it does indeed refer to Moses' successor AND to David and others but ultimately to the One born under a star in Bethlehem...and like Balaam the pagan, who was given an eye-opening and announces 7 blessings to Israel so the pagan astrologers from the East came to that star and brought gifts to the King of kings who was weak and helpless... God become weak for us...

Ultimately He, Jesus Christ will be revealed as the Once and Future King...He says in the last book of the Bible, The Apocalypse (which means "the reveal") "I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." (Revelation 22.16)

And then the Baby who came to us weak and helpless... who became a Man strong enough to bear the sins of the world and full of blessing (not only seven blessings but 70 x 7!) blessing for ALL WHO ARE IN HIM – the perfection of Israel and thĒ Seed of Abraham (Gal. 3.16)... He will come again and will silence all "the smiling faces lyin' to the races".

He will establish justice in the earth and will make right all the wrongs that WE have committed against one another...all the little white lies we have told...and the not-so-little lies...and the abuse and all the injustices and great crimes against God and against humanity ...the war crimes and wrongs that have never been made right.

Who are these enemies in the last verses of our reading today...these nations that we don't even recognize today... They meant something to the first readers but not so much for us...WHO

ARE THEY?

Well, the way the Bible works... with prophecies like Balaam's having a near fulfillment and a mid-range and even an ultimate fulfillment... those enemies who will be destroyed are all who... "work it", people like Balak and ancient cities where child sacrifice was practiced...and people right to this present day...anyone who loves sin... All control freaks: be warned!

And that's really bad news for US... unless... we simply turn away from OURSELVES and our love of control and manipulation and self-obsession and simply TRUST the One who IS the Star of the Show and who holds the Scepter.

See the really great news of this passage, as strange and foreign as it sounds, the astounding peace that it continues to extend to modern control freaks who think the world is on OUR shoulders and who are constantly working it and solving problems and staying positive and making it happen...playing God... the GOOD NEWS IS when we see that He is the Star of the Show and that His Scepter, the beautiful rule and reign of Jesus Christ...when we see that He came into the world to save sinners and control freaks... THEN WE BECOME THOSE WHO CANNOT BE CURSED and the government of our lives is on His shoulders... and no weapon formed against us can prosper.

The accusations of the world, the flesh and the devil are answered by Him, the Star come forth from Jacob who was cursed for ME so that I can only be blessed...and that nothing in this life...even death itself ...nothing can separate me from the love of God... Believe that today...it's the cure to our control issues – peace on Earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.