

PM Numbers 22:1-41 Balaam's Wish

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[0 : 0 0] of Numbers. We have quite a lengthy reading, but it is one of the most fascinating chapters in the whole of the Bible. In it you're going to read of a remarkable miracle. In it you're also going to read of things in which the Lord is poking fun, should we say, at those who are his enemies and the enemies of his people and who think so much of themselves and of their own power and influence that they don't realize that they're just really pawns in the hands of a sovereign almighty God. So this chapter is laced with irony and as we'll see from the next chapter in which our text for this evening will be found, you'll see the significance, I'm sure, of that irony. So let's begin in Numbers chapter 22. Numbers chapter 22. Let's read this portion of God's word together. Then the people of Israel set out and camped in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan at Jericho. And Balak, the son of

Zippor, saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. And Moab was in great dread of the people because they were many. Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel. And Moab said to the elders of Midian, this horde will now lick up all that is around us as the ox licks up the grass of the field. So Balak, the son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, sent messengers to Balaam, the son of Beor at Pethor, which is near the river in the land of the people of Amor, to call him saying, Behold, a people has come out of Egypt. They cover the face of the earth and they are dwelling opposite me. Come now, curse this people for me. Since they are too mighty for me, perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed and he whom you curse is cursed.

So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the fees for divination in their hand. And they came to Balaam and gave him Balak's message. And he said to them, Lodge here tonight and I will bring back word to you as the Lord speaks to me. So the princes of Moab stayed with Balaam. And God came to Balaam and said, Who are these men with you? And Balaam said to God, Balak, the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent to me saying, Behold, a people has come out of Egypt and it covers the face of the earth. Now come, curse them for me.

Perhaps I shall be able to fight against them and drive them out. God said to Balaam, You shall not go with them. You shall not curse the people for they are blessed. So Balaam rose in the morning and said to the princes of Balak, Go to your own land for the Lord has refused to let me go with you. So the princes of Moab rose and went to Balak and said, Balaam refuses to come with us. Once more, once again, Balak sent princes more in number and more honourable than these. And they came to Balaam and said to him, Thus says Balak, the son of Zippor, Let nothing hinder you from coming to me, for I will surely do you great honour and whatever you say to me, I will do. Come, curse this people for me.

But Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the Lord my God to do less or more. So you too, please stay here tonight that I may know what more the Lord will say to me. And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, If the men have come to call you, rise, go with them, but only do what I tell you. So Balaam rose in the morning and saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. But God's anger was kindled because he went. And the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey and his two servants were with him. And the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand. And the donkey turned aside out of the road and went into the field. And Balaam struck the donkey to turn her into the road. Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards with a wall on either side. And when the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she pushed against the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall. So he struck her again.

[5 : 59] Then the angel of the Lord went ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she lay down under Balaam.

And Balaam's anger was kindled and he struck the donkey with his staff. Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey and she said to Balaam, What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?

And Balaam said to the donkey, Because you have made a fool of me, I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you.

And the donkey said to Balaam, Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat you this way?

And he said, No. Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand.

[7 : 17] And he bowed down and fell on his face. And the angel of the Lord said to him, Why have you struck your donkey these three times?

Behold, I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse before me. The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times.

If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live. Then Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, I have sinned, for I did not know that you stood in the road against me.

Now therefore, if it is evil in your sight, I will turn back. And the angel of the Lord said to Balaam, Go with the men, but speak only the word that I tell you.

So Balaam went on with the princes of Balak. When Balak heard that Balaam had come, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab on the border formed by the Arnon, at the extremity of the border.

[8 : 27] And Balak said to Balaam, Did I not send to you to call you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honor you?

Balaam said to Balaam, Behold, I have come to you. Have I now any power of my own to speak anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that must I speak.

Then Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath Huzoth. And Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and sent for Balaam, and for the princes who were with him.

And in the morning, Balak took Balaam, and brought him up to Ramoth, Bamoth, Baal. And from there, he saw a fraction of the people.

And we'll continue the story into chapter 23, after we sing to God's praise again.

[9 : 30] Let's continue the reading then in chapter 23, and we'll read up to verse 12. So what did Balaam do when he arrived at Balak's kingdom in Moab?

And what did he say in regard to the children of Israel, the people of God? Did he bring a curse, as King Balak wanted, and was prepared to pay a handsome honorarium to Balaam for such a service?

Or did God overrule? Numbers 23, And Balaam said to Balak, Build for me here seven altars, and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams.

Balak did as Balaam had said, And Balak and Balaam offered on each altar a bull and a ram. And Balaam said to Balak, Stand beside your burnt offering, and I will go.

Perhaps the Lord will come to meet me, and whatever he shows me, I will tell you. And he went to a bare height, and God met Balaam.

[10 : 52] And Balaam said to him, I have arranged the seven altars, and I have offered on each altar a bull and a ram. And the Lord put a word in Balaam's mouth and said, Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak.

And he returned to him, and behold, he and all the princes of Moab were standing beside his burnt offering. And Balaam took up his discourse and said, From Aram Balak has brought me, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains.

Come, curse Jacob for me, and come, denounce Israel. How can I curse whom God has not cursed?

How can I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced? For from the top of the crags I see him, from the hills I behold him, behold a people dwelling alone, and not counting itself among the nations.

Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his.

[12 : 22] And Balak said to Balaam, What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have done nothing but bless them.

And he answered and said, Must I not take care to speak what the Lord puts in my mouth? Amen. Well, dear friends, I want to take as my text this evening the words we find in verse 10 of Numbers chapter 23, where this man Balaam says at the end of his first prophecy concerning Israel, Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his.

I don't think anyone knows who coined the phrase, The road to hell is paved with good intentions. But I'm sure you've heard it many a time.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. How many people are there in this world whose wish it is to go to heaven when they die?

[13 : 48] But it's a more sobering question to ask. How many people are there in hell today whose wish it was to be in heaven when they died?

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. One man in that great number who are in hell today is a man called Balaam.

Now on the face of it, it may be something of a surprise to us that this man ended up in hell.

For have we not just read one of his four remarkable prophecies concerning God's chosen people? Prophecies that echo the wonderful covenant promises that God made to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob about their posterity, their covenant relationship with God, the promised land and their glorious future under the Messiah whom God would in time send.

And did we not just read these remarkable words of Balaam at the end of the prophecy? Let me die the death of the upright and let my end be like his.

[15 : 23] And you might ask yourself, how could it be possible that a man who was used by God to utter such prophecies, A man whose mouth spoke such elevated and pious words should end up in hell suffering the wrath and judgment of God?

How is that possible? Balaam was a conflicted man. Or to use one of the phrases in the Bible, he was a double-minded man.

He was a man whose head pulled him in one direction, but whose heart pulled him in an opposite direction.

Balaam was a Gentile seer or soothsayer who practiced divination. He was basically a prophet for hire. You've heard of a gun hand for hire.

Well, he was a prophet for hire. And I think his reputation must have been really amazing because if you know the geography of this part of the ancient world, you will realize from our story that we've read together that Balak, the king of Moab, knew all about this man Balaam.

[16 : 47] Even though Balaam lived hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of miles away, up north beside the great river that was mentioned in the reading of chapter 22, which is the river Euphrates.

So here is Balaam, the king of Moab, roughly in the area around Jericho, on the other side of the Jordan River from the Promised Land.

And he knows that there's a man living hundreds of miles away in a pre-internet, pre-newspaper, pre-social media age who could be hired to make prophecies and put a curse on one's enemies so that hamstrung by this curse, Balak and his armies could confidently go to battle against these people who had done so much damage on their way out of Egypt towards the Promised Land.

And so Balak sent two successive sets of messengers to Balaam with a call and a promise of reward if he would come and curse the people of Israel for him. Now it appears that Balaam knew the Lord and sought his will regarding the matter.

He was told not to go to Balak at first, but following the second call from Balak, the Lord allowed him to go but told him he could only utter the words that God would have him speak.

[18 : 23] Now reading between the lines, it seems that Balaam's heart yearned for Balak's reward, the financial reward on offer from King Balak.

And I think it was a case of the Lord giving him his request but sending leanness into his soul. Psalm 106 verse 15.

But the Lord was angry with Balaam and he sent his angel sword in hand to destroy him had not the Lord in mercy caused Balaam's donkey to stop him in his tracks.

And isn't it interesting I said the passage was full of irony, but isn't it interesting and deeply ironic that the dumbest, stupidest animal in the world saw the truth that this great and famous seer, that's his name, he's a seer, failed to see, was blind to.

And so his eyes were opened in the encounter with the angel. He saw the angel of the Lord and he fell down on his face and he confessed his sin and he even offered to turn back, didn't he?

[19 : 48] But notice his words. If it is evil in your sight, I will turn back. And you say, hold on a minute.

Did you say if? If? If it is evil? And I think that's a little window into his heart.

Even now, his heart's leaning is made known through the way he speaks. If it is evil, I will turn back. He wants to go forward.

Lord, he's got his eyes on the money. But he knows that it's wrong. How conflicted he is.

But God is going to get glory from this whole episode and he allows him to proceed. And so he comes to Balak and they arrange this ostentatious, over-the-top religious ceremony building, not just one or two or three, but seven altars.

[20 : 57] And offering up seven bulls and seven rams, that brings tears to the eyes of the Kenyans, doesn't it? That, my friend, is the most expensive sacrifice, the most expensive animals that could be used in sacrifice.

What are they doing by this ceremony? Well, they're trying to do their best to win God over to their side so that Balaam can curse the Israelites.

But, my friends, God is not in the control or at the beck and call of men, not even great men like Balak, the king of Moab. The word he puts in Balaam's mouth confounds them both and rather than bring a curse on the Israelites, Balaam pronounces them to be blessed.

He says, how can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced? And then he speaks these remarkable words which I want to take as my text this evening.

Who can count the dust of Jacob? Or number the fourth part of Israel. My friends, that's an echo, isn't it, of the covenant promise to Abraham that his offspring would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore.

[22 : 25] Let me die the death of the upright and let my end be like his. What a wish. What a desire.

What an aspiration. What a good intention. Let me die the death of the righteous. the upright. Let my latter end be like his.

There are a few things I want to draw out from Balaam's wish that I trust will be helpful, everlastingly helpful to us all.

The first thing and the most obvious thing, it's so obvious you can easily miss it, death. But the first thing to notice is that death is common to all.

The upright die and the wicked die as well. Ever since the sin entered into the world, death has been the experience of the entire human race.

[23 : 31] Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 verse 22, in Adam all die. And the writer of the Hebrews chapter 9 verse 27 says, it is appointed.

Now this is an appointment that won't be cancelled or deferred. It is a red letter day in God's calendar.

It is the day of our death. It is appointed for man to die once and after that comes judgment. For man, for mankind, for the human race, for every single one of us, whether we're righteous, or whether we're wicked.

And we've heard a lot over the past couple of years about death and death rates, haven't we? But let me tell you this, as far as the human race is concerned, the death rate is 100%.

One out of one will die. And as I said, that's true whether you're good or bad or religious or irreligious, whether you're a regular churchgoer or an occasional churchgoer, whether you're rich or whether you're poor, whether you're black or white or Protestant or Catholic, Muslim or Jew, man or woman, boy or girl, one out of one dies.

[25 : 09] And Balaam, to his credit, knew that one day he would die. And his words surely indicate that he was not an upright or righteous man. But he had a wish that though he was not upright, he wanted to die the death of the upright.

And though his end was not that of the upright, he wished it would be so. Even at the end of what has been commonly referred to as a global pandemic, pandemic, when there was hardly a day when the grim death count has not been broadcast on the BBC News, it is still possible for us not to think seriously about the reality of our own death and of our own dying.

J.C. Ryle, the first bishop of Liverpool, once wrote, there is nothing so certain as death, but nothing so uncertain as the time of dying.

Therefore, I will be prepared at all times for that which may come at any time. A couple of years ago, Heather, my wife and I were back in our hometown of Bangor in County Down.

It was the first visit in almost a year. One of the things we wanted to do was to visit the Clandy Boy Cemetery on the outskirts of Bangor so that we could view the headstones on the graves of my mother and Heather's father.

[26 : 58] Having been buried within seven months of each other, their graves were not too far apart. And as we walked up and down, the rows of neat headstones glancing at the names and the dates of birth, I couldn't help but notice that so many of those who were recently buried were born in years that are getting closer and closer to my own year of birth.

death. And it reminded me of how quickly time passes and the truth of the scriptures that say all flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass.

The grass withers and the flower falls. Or Psalm 90 verses 10 and 12, the years of our life are 70 or even by reason of strength 80.

yet their span is but toil and trouble. They are soon gone and we fly away. So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

My friends, surely it is wisdom, wisdom of the highest order, to reckon on the brevity of life and the certainty of death, and to recognise in more than just a theoretical shrug of the shoulders kind of way, yeah we all die don't we?

[28 : 39] But the death may come at any time and like J.C. Ryle we shall be prepared for its coming by turning from sin and receiving and resting upon Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

So that's my first point. so obvious but easily missed. Death is common to us all. My second point drawn from these words of Balaam in Numbers 23 10 is that death is not the end of our existence. And again Balaam knew this truth. He knew death was certain and he knew that death was not the end. Though an ungodly man who loved the world and the things of the world, he knew that the human soul is immortal.

It doesn't die. It isn't extinguished. It continues to exist forever after the body dies and is laid in the grave.

Because surely his words make absolutely no sense whatever if death is the end of everything. Ask yourself, why does he want to die the death of the upright? the end of the upright?

[29 : 51] Why does he want his end to be like the end of the upright? Surely it is because he knew that there is something dark and foreboding about the death of the wicked and there is something bright and glorious about the death of the righteous.

Now though Balaam didn't enjoy the light and knowledge that we have on this side of the New Testament, yet he did not want to die the death of the wicked.

He did not want to meet death in his present condition. Hence his wish. Let me briefly tell you what God's word teaches about the death of the righteous and the death of the wicked and to do that there's no better definition drawn from scripture than the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which is one of the foundation documents of the Free Church of Scotland.

Question 19 says, what is the misery of that estate wherein to man fell? All mankind by their fall lost communion with God are under his wrath and curse and so made liable to all miseries in this life, to death itself, and here's the killer punch, and to the pains of hell forever.

Question 37, what benefits do believers receive from Christ at death? death. What a contrast.

[31 : 42] The souls of believers are at death, one, made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory, and their bodies, being still united to Christ, because nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.

And then question 38 says, what benefits do believers receive from Christ at the resurrection? And the answer is, at the resurrection, believers, being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and equated in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all

eternity.

What a contrast. On the one side, the pains of hell forever. And on the other side, raised up in glory, openly acknowledged and equated on the day of judgment, made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.

And that brings us to the third and final point. It is one thing to have clear opinions of saving truth. And it's another thing to resolve to be saved in the light of that truth.

Now look at Balaam again closely. Put him under the magnifying glass that we were talking to the children about this morning. Look at him closely. Let me die the death of the righteous.

[33 : 29] Let my latter end be like his. You bring out the magnifying glass and you look and examine Balaam in the light of his statement and what can you say?

And maybe you turn forward in the Bible to other passages of scripture, you take out your concordance, you look up Balaam, you find other passages that relate to him, the book of Deuteronomy and in the New Testament.

And your conclusion has to be this, here was a man whose opinion was better than his resolution. Now what do I mean by that? Well he says let me die the death of the upright and let my end be like his and yet having said those words he makes absolutely no effort to see his wish fulfilled.

fulfilled. And as we read actually to Numbers 30 verses 8 and 16 if you turn to those passages later Numbers 30 8 and 16 you will see that Balaam sided with the Moabites he counseled them to compromise the Israelites through intermarriage with the Moabite woman.

[34 : 52] this would be the way to get the Israelites to forsake their covenant lord and to worship the gods of Moab and that would guarantee his judgment upon them.

You can't curse them directly but if you do this bit of political intrigue get them to intermarry with you. They will adopt your gods and that will invite God's judgment down upon them and as a result of that counsel and those actions the lord later took vengeance upon Moab and when he did Balaam was singled out as a true persona non grata and was put to death and in the new testament his name becomes a byword for false prophecy and false teaching and for immorality.

So what can we draw from this? Well it's tragic to say that there are many who desire to die the death of the righteous but who do not endeavor to live the life of the righteous.

Oh yes they want their end. to be like that of the righteous but they do not want their way to that end to be like that of the righteous.

Or to put it another way they want to be saints in heaven but they don't want to be saints on earth. Proverbs 13 4 says the soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing.

[36 : 46] Or in the old authorized version the soul of the sluggard desireth and hath nothing. You think of a farmer he desires a harvest but if he is a sluggard and doesn't take the trouble to plow and to fertilize his field and to sow the seed and to weed the crop he will get no harvest.

he can desire all he wants but if he doesn't use the means he will not achieve the end. The old Puritan commentator Matthew Henry says that these words of Balaam are only a wish but they're not a prayer.

And he says that it is a vain wish because he only wishes for the end without any care or concern for using the means to that end.

My friends it's possible to be moved under the preaching of God's word. It's possible to feel the hairs on the back of your neck standing up as you hear the truth, the solemn truth from God's word. It's possible to feel something of the power of the truth to come under a sense of conviction. Even to feel guilty and polluted in the presence of God. It's possible even to wish for deliverance at the hands of Jesus Christ.

[38 : 29] It's possible to wish for all of those things. Have you ever read the Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan? It's a wonderful book. Full of fantastically drawn, accurately drawn word pictures.

believers. There's a character at the beginning of the Pilgrim's Progress whose name is Pliable. Pliable went happily with Christian, the pilgrim, when he left the city of destruction to go to the wicked gate and ultimately to the cross.

And Pliable loved to listen to Christian tell him what he had read in his book, the Bible. and he especially loved the stories in the Bible about the glory that awaited them in the celestial city, the heavenly city.

And here's a snippet from their conversation as they leave the city of destruction on the way to the wicked gate. Christian says there is an endless kingdom to be inhabited and everlasting life to be

given us that we may inhabit that kingdom forever.

And Pliable says, well said. And what else? There are crowns of glory to be given us and garments that will make us shine like the sun in the firmament of heaven.

[39 : 51] And Pliable replies, this is very pleasant. And what else? There shall be no more crying nor sorrow for he that is owner of the place will wipe away all tears from our eyes.

And Pliable says, and what company shall we have there? And Christian says there shall be there we shall be with seraphims and cherubims, creatures that will dazzle your eyes to look on them. There also you shall meet with thousands and ten thousands that have gone before us to that place. None of them are hurtful, but loving and holy, everyone walking in the sight of God and standing in his presence with acceptance forever.

In a word, there we shall see the elders with their golden crowns. There we shall see the holy virgins with their golden harps. There we shall see men that by the word were cut, the world were cut in pieces, burnt in flames, eaten of beasts, drowned in seas, for the love that they bore to the Lord of the place, all well, and clothed with immortality as with a garment.

And Pliable says, the hearing of this is enough to ravish one's heart. You see, he's come under the sound and power of the word of God.

[41 : 15] The truth is making some sort of impact upon his heart. He feels it. And yet, just a few moments after saying these words, this is enough to ravish one's heart, they both fall into the slough of despond.

And we read, at this pliable, began to be offended, and angrily said to his fellow, is this the happiness you have told me all this while of?

If we have such ill speed at our first setting out, what may we expect, twixt this and our journey's end? May I get out with my life, you shall possess the brave country alone for me.

And with that he gave a desperate struggle or two, and got out of the mire on that side of the slough which was next to his own house, so away he went, and Christian saw him no more.

My friends, there's a world of difference. There is an eternity of difference between having an opinion of a saint, or a Christian, and having the resolution of a saint or a Christian.

[42 : 36] How can we get that resolve? Well, I would say, give yourself to the means of grace that God has provided for you. Sit regularly under the sound of the word of God, come to church regularly, and as you come, pray from your heart that the Lord will make himself and his saving ways known to you in particular.

In the words of the psalmist, send forth your light and your truth, that they may guide me in the way of life.

Pray to the Lord. His word calls to you saying, seek my face, and let your response be, that of the psalmist, your face Lord, will I seek.

And remember the promise that God has made, all who seek me will find me when they seek for me with all their heart. And then turn from your sin and to the Lord.

Isaiah 55, 6 and 7, seek the Lord while he may be found. There will be a time when he won't be found. But seek him while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near.

[44 : 02] The Lord is near. He is near us right now. Call upon him. But it says, let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts.

Let him return to the Lord that he may have compassion on him and to our God for he will abundantly pardon. And then join with the people of God.

God has ordained a mutual support for his people in the church. We are here to help one another heavenward. And then patiently wait on the Lord in his ordinances.

Treasure the moments of baptism that we have in the church. Treasure the time spent around the Lord's table. These word picture ordinances preach the gospel to us and they confirm God's word in our hearts.

And then look for and hasten the Lord's return. Till he come. Even so come Lord Jesus.

[45 : 12] That's how you get the resolve. These are the means of grace. And then you'll be able to say with an assurance that Balaam never experienced.

Let me die the death of the righteous and let my latter end be like his. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, put on record and said, our people die well.

And he wasn't talking about the physical process of dying. Sometimes that can be very, very hard. Even with all the advances in medical science.

But to die well is to die in faith. trusting, resting, leaning upon the everlasting arms.
Is that where you are this evening? Leaning upon the everlasting arms. May God bless his word to us.

[46 : 31] We're going to close nexteny