

'Rebuked by a Donkey'

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[0 : 0 0] Well, apart from languages, I wonder what else you love in life. Whether it's your footy team, like this Brisbane Lions supporter, or some other sport, or your! car like this guy who brings it roses. It's not even a Ferrari. I think it's a minivan, it looks like. But anyway. Or perhaps your job, if you're still working or eating out with friends and family, perhaps it's your pet cat whom you love, or if you're not a cat person, a pet dog that you love. Or perhaps it's family whom you love, or perhaps all of the above.

What is it that you love in life? But the real question, of course, is who or what do you love most in life? Because today we'll meet a guy called Balaam who loves money most in life, and whom the Bible uses as a warning. And so while there were lots of points in last week's chapter, today's chapter is just a one-pointer. Don't be a Balaam who loves money. Though his love is not obvious at first. And so let's have a look. And because it's a story that's easy to get the gist of, we won't reread every verse and unpack it. But we will start at the beginning, where Moab hires Balaam the seer. So point one, verse one. Israelites have now finally made it to the edge of the promised land, and they're parked in the plains of Moab, near the Jordan River, just across from Jericho on the other side. And so they're ready to enter. Now, last week we were told, in last week's chapter, we were told that the Amorites had actually captured some of that territory. So here's the plains of Moab where that big red arrow is, and Moab is in the blue. But it's still called the plains of Moab because the blue used to extend all the way up. But the Amorites, whom we met last week, conquered Moab and pushed them back down to the blue area. But either way, where the big arrow is, that's where Israel is parked, ready to enter the promised land.

And so in verse two to three, King Balak of Moab is terrified. Not only has Israel defeated the Amorites who once defeated them, there is so many of them. And so the whole nation of Moab, we're told, is filled with dread because of the Israelites. But here's the thing. Israel had actually already passed Moab. See the red line on the right-hand side of the screen? They kind of went up on the right-hand side, the edge of Moab, and they kept going up towards the Jordan River. So they've already actually passed Moab without attacking them. And so why does King Balak want to now go and poke them? I mean, if a bear wanders past your tent while camping up to a river in front of you, would you then leave your tent to go up and poke the bear? Of course not, because he might turn around and kill you. And so Balak's fear is foolishness, actually. Though at least he realizes he needs help. And so in verse four, he goes to the Midianites who also lived in the area.

They were more nomadic. And so there was no colored area for them. They lived around where the Amorites were last week, whom Israel conquered. And he says, Israel is going to consume everything. So let's get our money together and hire Balaam to curse them. And so they send messengers to Balaam, who lives way up north, for him to come down and curse them. And so in verse five to six, Balak sends them with this message to

Balaam, a people that's come out of Egypt, they cover the face of the land and have settled next to me. Now come and put a curse on these people because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that whoever you bless is blessed and whoever you curse is cursed. And so it seems that Balaam has a reputation for cursing or blessing people. And in fact, it kind of sounds like what God promised Abraham back in Genesis. Remember way back in Genesis, God said to Abraham, I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you, I will curse. But here's the thing, Balaam doesn't rely on God generally for blessing and cursing. It seems he relies on evil spirits to help him. For he uses what's called divination, a kind of modern day version of a seance, if you like. And so Balaam is what is called a seer.

[4 : 54] A seer means someone who sees the spiritual world. And he's able to, it seems, rely on evil spirits for cursing or blessing, but for a fee. So verse seven goes on to say, the elders of Moab and Midian left, taking with them the fee for divination. And when they came to Balaam, they told Balaam what the king had said about Israel. And so Balaam is a seer for hire. It's kind of like going to this place and instead of hiring a chainsaw, you hire a seer. You know, blessings for bucks or cursings for coins.

Whatever your pleasure is, I can do it for a fee. But before he goes to curse Israel, it seems he wants to practice a bit of his voodoo. And he says in verse eight, that he'll check it out with the God of Israel. It seems like he goes to whichever gods of the nations to try and manipulate them or something or other. And so that's what he does in verse eight. I'll report back to you with the answer that the Lord gives me. Notice he even uses God's personal name, the Lord in capitals, which is Yahweh in Hebrew, perhaps to show that he's got the right God of Israel. Presumably the Moabites heard about his name as Israel, the horde passed by them up towards the Jordan. Either way, in verse nine, God instead comes to him and says, who are these men? And then God says, perhaps in a vision or dream in verse 12, do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people because they are blessed.

And notice that's past tense. They are blessed. They are already blessed by God. But God has already decided to be their God and they his people. He's already increased their numbers and he's in the process of giving them the land. This is what God promised Abraham back in Genesis. You know, a land, a great offspring or nation and the blessing of being his people and he their God. And so because of that promise way back then, because it's already begun here, God's blessing was binding. It's not going to change. And this verse 12 will be a key verse for next week. But for this week, it means Balaam cannot go with them. And in verse 13, Balaam seems to obey God, doesn't he? But then things start to change, which brings us to point two, Balaam the politician. And in verse 15, they go away and then they come back from Balak with a second offer. This time with more numerous and more distinguished people than the first time. And Balak then says, I will reward you handsomely and do whatever you say, come and put a curse on these people for me. And so how will Balaam respond this time? Well, verse 18 and 19, he answered, even if Balak gave me all the silver and gold in his palace, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the Lord my God. Now spend the night here so that I can find out what else the Lord will tell me. Now, I wonder at this point, if you think Balaam is doing what's right or what's wrong. Because at first glance, it seems pretty good, doesn't it? It seems like a good answer. But that's because we cannot see his heart like God can. And so God actually shows us his heart in the New Testament. And so in 2 Peter, Peter's talking about false teachers who have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness. He loves money for wickedness. Or Jude 11, the false teachers have rushed for profit into Balaam's error. That was his error. He chased after money for profit. You see, Balaam loves money. That's what's first in his heart. Now, knowing that, let's have a look at verse 18 and 19 of our passage again.

And so when he says, even if Balaam gave me all the silver and gold in his palace, what do you think he's hoping Balaam might give him? Hint, hint, nudge, nudge. All the silver and gold in his palace, or at least a stack of it. And notice when he says, I could not go beyond the command of the Lord my God. He calls God my God. But he's not an Israelite. He doesn't even live with the nation. And he practices divination, which is outlawed by God. God is not his God. And so his declaration that he cannot go beyond the command of God seems a little sus. He's claiming to be one of God's people, but he's not really. And so the command doesn't seem genuine. It kind of reminds me of a dodgy politician. Don't get me wrong, by the way, there are good politicians, but a dodgy one makes promises, perhaps like never getting rid of negative gearing and then breaks the claim.

[10 : 28] Is that too soon? Anyway. I mean, even the fact in verse 19, he says he'll go back to see what God says or what else the Lord will tell him this time. But God has already told him. These people are blessed. They're not to be cursed. Just tell them to go away. Don't go with them. If Balaam was actually genuine here, he'd just tell these guys to get on their bike or get on their camel or whatever and go back home. But he kind of acts like kids. You know, when kids don't get the answer they want the first time, what do they do? They usually go to the other parent. And if there's only one parent, they'll just come back a little bit later on to see if they can get a different answer.

Well, that seems to be what Balaam's doing here. He's going back to God trying to get a different answer. Now, God knows all this, but will use it for his own purposes, as we'll see next week. And so in verse 20, God ends up telling him to go with them, but only on one condition, do only what I tell you. And we need to remember that condition to help us understand what happens next and why God is angry and rebukes Balaam with his donkey to show his folly, which is point three, verse 21. Let me read it to you because we haven't heard it yet.

Balaam got up in the morning, settled his donkey and went with the Moabite officials. But God was very angry when he went and the angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him. Balaam was riding on his donkey and his two servants were with him. Now, immediately you might think, hang on a second, in verse 20, God told him to go. But now in verse 22, God's angry that he went.

[12:20] What's going on here? Well, we need to remember that there were two things God told him in verse 20. Firstly, go with them, sure. But secondly, do only what I tell you. And given that God knows his heart and that we now know his heart too, a heart that loves money, what do you think Balaam is secretly planning to do? I think he's secretly planning to still try and curse Israel for a payday.

He's planning not to do what God tells him to do. And I think this is made clear by the fact that God reinforces this a little bit later on in verse 35. He says, go with the men, but speak only what I tell you.

Balaam. Because it seems that Balak was not planning to. And so what God is angry at, it's not that Balaam is going, but that Balaam is going with a plan to curse Israel for a payday, to not do what God tells him to do or to not speak what God tells him to speak. And so what follows is God rebuking Balaam for his reckless secret planning to show he's foolish for thinking he can go against God. And so picking up in verse 23, when the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, he turned off the road and into a field. Balaam beat it to get it back on the road. And then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path through a vineyard with walls on both sides. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. So he beat the donkey again. And then for a third time, the angel of the Lord moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Balaam and he was angry and beat it with his staff. Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth and it said to Balaam, what have I done to you to make you beat me these three times? Balaam answered the donkey, you have made a fool of me. If only I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you now. The donkey said to Balaam, am I not your own donkey, which you've always ridden to this day? Have I really been in the habit of doing this to you? No, he said. Then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell face down. The angel of the Lord asked him, why have you beaten your donkey these three times?

[15:00] I've come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me. The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but would have spared it. It's a great story, isn't it? Apart from the beating of the donkey, which I'm sure the RSPCA would have something to say about, but it's also meant to be a bit of a comical event. I mean, don't you love how Balaam talks to his donkey as though it's normal?

I mean, outside of Shrek, if you've seen Shrek with the talking donkey, this is not normal. And so Balaam is shown to be rather a fool. You know, he just talked to the donkey without realising this is not normal. You know, as if to say there's something more going on here.

All right. Plus, even the donkey says in verse 28 and following or down towards the bottom in verse 30, am I not your own donkey, which you've always ridden? Am I not? Have I been in the habit of, you know, crushing you and talking to you? You know, is this normal, Balaam? He still doesn't get it.

The fact that it happened three times and he still didn't get it shows that Balaam's a fool. Plus, the donkey sees the angel of the Lord when Balaam, the seer, cannot see the angel of the Lord. He's shown up by a donkey. He's a fool. What's more, he's saved by the donkey. The angel of the Lord says he would have killed Balaam if the donkey had not turned away those three times. And so Balaam is saved by a donkey of all animals and ends up beating the very donkey that saves him.

It's all foolishness, you see. The whole rebuking with a donkey is meant to show Balaam's folly because, verse 32, his path is a reckless one before God. For he's planning to go against what God tells him and curse Israel for money. And again, we know this because in verse 34, he kind of says his sin and offers to go back if he's displeased. But it's not at the going that's the problem. It's the planning to do something different. And so the angel of the Lord says, no, no, go with the man. But again, speak only what I tell you. Now, you think Balaam would have learned his lesson by now, but I'm not entirely sure. Because I suspect he's still hoping for a bit of a payday.

[17 : 35] Because in verse 37, towards the end of the chapter, he finally arrives in Moab. And the King Balak says, you know, didn't I summon you urgently? Why didn't you come to me? Am I not able to reward you? Well, I've come now, Balaam says. But I can't say whatever I please. I must speak only what God puts in my mouth, which is true. But what else can't he do? He cannot curse Israel.

And does he say that? No. It's a half truth. The full truth is he must only speak what God says, and that will mean that he cannot curse Israel for Balak. But he leaves that bit out, doesn't he?

You see, it seems that Balaam has no refund policy. He doesn't want to give his fee for divination back to Balak. And so he keeps quiet about not being able to curse Israel. Perhaps he's still somehow hoping to curse them and get more money from Balak. Either way, he hasn't entirely learned his lesson.

In fact, later on in Numbers, he does work against Israel and cause them to be unfaithful to God. But for today, he's a warning for us. And the warning is, don't be a Balaam who loves money. Whereas we heard in our second reading, the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Please note, money and making money is not the problem. After all, we're to use money for good, like providing for our needs and our families, saving for the future, helping others in need, supporting gospel ministry so people can hear about Jesus and be saved.

[19 : 25] So there's nothing wrong with making money and using money for good. Rather, it's the love of money that's bad. For the love of money is a root from which springs all kinds of evil acts, like cursing people, lying to people, stealing from people. I mean, these past two weeks, many of us have been dealing with email scams, haven't we? And what do the scammers want?

Money. In fact, according to the ACCC, Australians lost \$2.18 billion in scams last year alone, just last year. And many are older people who are less familiar with technology, like John and Gail Young from Geelong, who lost half a million in an elaborate AI scam.

The AI generated a fake video of Eddie Maguire talking about an investment opportunity, and they fell for it. But easy to do. You see, the love of money often involves stepping on people or misusing people like this, or to get more money. But as one quote says, we're to use money and love people, not love money and use people. But you see, when we do love money, it does end up manipulating and using people for financial gain. And one way we can tell if we love money, here's a litmus test. If we love money more than people, it's by seeing if we are generous or tight-fisted when it comes to helping people. Are we generous or tight-fisted? Because that will show where our love is. Now again, we need to be wise and work within our means, within our budget.

There's no point giving away all our money to help people and then becoming a burden to others. But loving money actually doesn't just mean scamming people. It also means being tight-fisted towards people. But worst of all, the love of money leads people away from God and into griefs of many kinds. I've seen it happen. In fact, it's happening right now in one of our congregations, where some members have been working longer and longer hours in the pursuit of promotion and the money that comes with it, to the point where they've stopped coming to church. And it leads to more grief because it's caused them to neglect their family and now their marriage is falling apart.

Now, yes, there are seasons in life where you have to work harder and longer. That's normal. But if it's all about chasing the almighty dollar rather than the almighty God, then it can lead us away from God altogether and away from eternal life with griefs of many kinds.

[22 : 26] And so the solution is to realise that great gain is not financial gain, but at the start of the second reading, godliness with contentment. That's actually great gain. Because verse 7 says, you cannot take money with you, can you?

Whereas godliness lasts for eternity. I mean, it's kind of like this cartoon where people are constantly chasing money in this world, only to one day fall into the grave and then that's it. The money's gone. They can't take it with them. But godliness lasts for eternity. It's a true investment. Contentment. And contentment keeps us from doing that, from chasing money, just

being content.

But in the end, it all comes back to our hearts, what we love in life. As Jesus himself said, Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and vermin destroy and thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where moth and vermin do not destroy, where thieves do not break in and steal.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. And so the question to ask ourselves is, what do I, what do we treasure most? Because that will tell us what we love most, where our heart is.

[23 : 40] Or to put it differently, if people looked at your life, what would they say you love most? If it is God, then it will cause us to serve him and honour him in our lives above all others.

And in that way, that's how we store up treasure for ourselves in heaven, which will last, which we can take with us. Indeed, it's worth serving and honouring our God, because he gave his only son, Jesus, to die for us.

Didn't he? We can all love lots of things in life, whether it's footy or friends or food or pet dogs or cars or cats, even our job and, of course, our family.

We're to love our family, of course. But there's one thing we are not to love, and that's money.

Indeed, even with all those other things, we're to love God most, even more than family.

He's to be first in our heart. And so the twofold point for today is, don't be a Balaam who loved money, but love God more than all.

[24 : 50] Let's pray we would.