

Numbers 23: 1-12

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 July 2021

Preacher: Jonathan Watson

[0 : 0 0] In this chapter, we're going to read of Balaam coming to Balak, the king of Moab, who has called for this prophet, this soothsayer, diviner, to come to him and to pronounce a curse upon the children of Israel.

The invitation went out in chapter 22, and in chapter 23, Balaam comes and delivers the first of what will be four prophecies, words from God put into Balaam's mouth that will frustrate Balak, but will show the power and sovereignty of God, and the truth that those whom God blesses, no one can curse.

So let's read these words together. Numbers chapter 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.

[1 : 4 0] 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?

[2 : 5 6] Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his. 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. May God bless the reading of his word. To us. I want to focus your attention this evening on the words of verse 10, the second half of verse 10 of chapter 23 of Numbers, where we see or hear Balaam say these words, Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his.

No one knows who coined the phrase, but it has become a well-known proverb in the English language.

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

[4 : 26] But it's probably a more sobering question to ask. How many people are there in hell this afternoon whose wish it was not to be in hell, but to be in heaven?

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. One man, I believe, 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 of God, which he spoke to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Prophecies about their posterity, their covenant relationship with God, the promised land, and their glorious future under the Messiah whom God would send.

All of these themes are mentioned or spoken of by Balaam in these prophecies that God put into his mouth. And did we not just read these remarkable words of Balaam?

[5 : 52] Let me die the death of the upright and let my end be like his. How could it be possible that a man who was used by God to utter such remarkable prophecies, a man whose mouth spoke such elevated and pious words?

How is it possible that such a man could end up in hell suffering the wrath and judgment of God?

Balaam, I'm sad to say, was a conflicted man. He was a double-minded man, if you will, a man whose heart pulled him in one direction, but whose head pulled him in the opposite direction.

Balaam was a Gentile seer or seer who practiced divination. He was a prophet for hire whose reputation must have been considerable because in this story, if we had time to read chapter 23 or 22, you would know that Balak was the king of Moab and yet he knew exactly where to send his messengers to find Balaam who lived away up in the north in Mesopotamia near the great river Euphrates.

Balak the king of Moab sent two successive sets of messengers or emissaries to Balaam with a call and with a promise of great reward if he would come and curse the people of Israel for him, this people who had come out of Egypt and who were now encamped opposite his own country.

[7 : 58] It appears that Balaam knew the Lord and it appears that Balaam sought his will regarding the matter.

Initially, he was told not to go to Balak but following the second call from Balak, the Lord allowed him to go but told him he would only be able to utter the words that God would have him speak.

Now, reading between the lines, it seems that Balaam, Balaam's heart yearned for the financial reward that was an offer from the king of Moab and I think it was a case of the Lord giving Balaam his request but at the same time sending in the words of Psalm 106 verse 15 leanness into Balaam's heart into Balaam's soul but the Lord was angry with Balaam for going and you know the familiar story of how the Lord sent his angel with sword in hand to destroy Balaam and he would have destroyed him had not the Lord in mercy caused Balaam's donkey to stop him in his tracks and isn't it interesting and deeply ironic as you read those verses in chapter 22 that the stupidest animal known to man saw the truth that the great seer soothsayer diviner prophet was blind to and so his eyes were opened he saw the angel drawn sword in hand and in response he fell on his face and confessed his sin he even offered to turn back at that point saying if it is evil in your sight and you have to ask yourself if

Balaam did you say if it is evil in your sight even there you can see Balaam's heart and his heart is leaning it's made evident and known he's conflicted his heart wants to go but his head's telling him he shouldn't go but the angel allows him to proceed and so he comes to Balak and they arrange this ostentatious over the top religious ceremony that we read about in the opening verses of chapter 23 building these seven altars offering up seven bulls and seven rams these were the most expensive animals that could be used in sacrifice and what are they doing it looks as if they're doing their best to win God over to their side so that

Balaam will be able to curse the Israelites so that Balak and his armies will be able to easily defeat them but God is not in the control of men even great men like Balak the king of Moab no the word that God puts in Balaam's mouth confounds them both rather than bring a curse on the Israelites Balaam pronounces them to be blessed how can I curse him God has not cursed he says as he delivers the prophecy how can I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced verse 8 and then he speaks these remarkable words the second half of which I want to take as my text who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel that's an echo of the Lord's promise to Abraham that Abraham's offspring would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of

[12:10] Israel let me die the death of the upright and let my end be like his and you have to say to yourself what a remarkable wish what an aspiration what a good intention let me die the death of the upright and let my end be like his there's a few things I'd like to draw out from Balaam's wish and I trust that these will be helpful indeed everlastingly helpful to us all the first is a most obvious and plain truth death and that is that death is common to all of us human beings for the upright or righteous die and the wicked die as well ever since sin entered into the world death has been the experience of the entire human race as Paul says in 1st

Corinthians 15 in Adam all die or as the writer of the Hebrews says in chapter 9 verse 27 it is appointed for man to die once and after that comes judgment each and every one of us has an appointment in our diaries an appointment that can't be put off an appointment that we cannot cancel an appointment that we must keep it is appointed for man to die now we've heard a lot about death and death rates over the past year or so but let me tell you this as far as the human race is concerned the death rate is 100% or to put it another way one out of one will die and that is true whether you are a good or bad person it's true whether you're religious or whether you're irreligious whether you're a regular churchgoer or an occasional churchgoer whether you're rich or whether you're poor whether you're black whether you're white whether you're a protestant or a catholic or a muslim or a jew or a hindu or a buddhist whether you're a man or a woman whether you're a boy or a girl balaam knew that one day he would die 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 that his end would be so even at the end of what has been commonly referred to as a global pandemic when there has hardly been a day when the death count has not been broadcast on the

BBC news it is still possible for us not to think seriously about about the reality of our death and our 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 weeks ago Heather and I were back in our hometown of Bangor for the first time in almost a year one of the things we wanted to do during that visit was to go to the cemetery to view the headstones on the graves of my mother and Heather's father having been buried within seven months of each other the graves were not too far apart and as we walked up and down the neat rows of new headstones in Clandy Boy Cemetery 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 the year in which

I was born and it reminded me of how quickly time passes in the past few months I've heard of two friends back home in Northern Ireland two ministers with whom I studied at college and university who have died suddenly just a year or two after entering into retirement one when riding his bicycle suddenly had a harder time the other just this week this past week suddenly passing away these truths drive home to us the powerful truth expressed in these scriptures that teach us that all flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass grass the grass withers and the flower falls you're going to wither like the grass your flower is going to fall like the grass psalm 90 10 and 12 says that the years of our life are 70 or even by reason of strength 80 although there's no guarantee that we'll see 70 or 80 yet says the psalmist their span is but toil and trouble my friend even if you should live to 70 or 80 or longer these words are still true they are soon gone and we fly away and reflecting on this truth the psalmist lifts up his heart to god and prayer and says so teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom surely it is wisdom to reckon on the brevity of life surely it is wisdom to reckon on the brevity of life and the certainty of death and to recognize in more than just a theoretical way in which we shrug the shoulders and say yeah but sure everybody dies to recognize in a more than a theoretical way that we will die and that death may come at any time and like

[20 : 32] J.C. Ryle let us be prepared for its coming by turning away from sin and by receiving and resting upon Christ alone for salvation as you have heard him offered to you personally in the gospel my second point drawn from these words of Balaam in numbers 23 10 is that death is not the end of our existence now Balaam knew this truth and I know that you know this truth as well now though Balaam was an ungodly man who loved the world and who loved the things of the world he knew fine well that the human soul is immortal it is not extinguished when the body dies but the soul of man continues to exist forever and surely his words make absolutely no sense whatever if death is the end of everything as so many today glibly say why ask yourself does Balaam want to die the death of the upright and why ask yourself does he want his end to be like the end of the righteous surely it is because he knew that there is something dark and foreboding about the death of the wicked and that there is something bright and glorious about the death of the righteous now although

Balaam did not enjoy the light and knowledge that we possess because we have the full revelation of God and Christ in the New Testament nevertheless he was a man who did not want to die in his present state and condition 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 I'll use the words of the shorter catechism which so admirably sums up scripture's teaching on these subjects question 19 asks us what is the misery of that estate into which man fell this is speaking about the consequences of the fall of Adam into sin and how

Adam brought his whole race with him into that fallen state with all its misery but what is the misery of that state into which Adam fell and the answer is devastating 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 to the pains of hell forever we've lost communion with God we're under his wrath and curse we're made liable to all miseries in this life though by God's grace we may not experience all miseries but we will experience some of them at least we will experience death itself and unless we are saved we will experience the pains of hell forever that's why we need to be saved then question 37 focuses on the believer and what the believer receives from Christ when the believer dies and the answer is the souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory and their bodies being still united to

Christ do rest in their graves till the resurrection and the next question asks well what benefits do believers receive from Christ at the resurrection and the answer given is at the resurrection believers being raised up in glory shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity now contrast these two things the estate into which man fell the misery of that estate lost communion with God under God's wrath and curse made liable to all the miseries of this life the death itself and the pains of hell forever made perfect in holiness to immediately pass into glory raised up in glory bodily acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity the death of the wicked the pains of hell forever the death and resurrection of the righteous made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity because God has acknowledged them and has acquitted them in the day of judgment and the third thing I want us to look at and focus our attention on as we draw this meditation to a close is that it is one thing to have clear opinions of saving truth and it's a completely different thing to resolve to be saved in the light of that truth and I think this is the crux of the matter because I believe I'm speaking to people who know the truth who've got a pretty good grasp of the truth who know the difference between being saved and being lost and who perhaps like Balaam wish themselves to die the death of the righteous and wish themselves to experience the end the goal of the righteous in and through death now look at Balaam his opinion was so much better than his personal resolution what do

I mean by that well he says let me die the death of the upright and let my end be like his that's his opinion of things that's his understanding of things he sees that the death of the righteous is better far better than the death of the wicked and considering the life after death if we can express it in those terms he sees that the life after death of the righteous is infinitely better than the life or existence after death of the wicked and so he expresses this intention this wish this opinion let me die the death of the upright and let my end be like his but but he makes no effort to see his wish fulfilled and if you skip on a few chapters into numbers chapter 30 and look at verse 8 and look at verse 16 you will see that

[29 : 50] Balaam in spite of all these wonderful prophecies that he delivered to Balaak concerning Israel Balaam did not side with the Israelites or with the God he describes as the Lord my God he instead sided with Balak and the Moabites and he advised them to compromise the Israelites through giving the Moabite young woman to the Israelite men and luring them into idolatry through intermarriage and we read that he was slain by the sword when the Lord rose up to take vengeance on the nation of Moab and if you skip forward into the New Testament you look up a concordance put

Balaam's name in there you will find that in the New Testament Balaam's name is a byword for false prophecy for false teaching false teaching that is mixed up with an immoral fornicating lifestyle life so what can we draw from this well it is tragic to say that there are many in this world as I said at the beginning who desire to die the death of the upright or the righteous but who do not endeavor to live the life of the upright or the righteous oh yes they want their end to be like that of the righteous we hear of these ungodly people passing away and the comments made include the words rest in peace include the words oh he's in heaven now having a good time with the angels and so forth oh yes these are people who want their end to be like that of the righteous but they don't want their way of life here on earth to be like the upright or to be like the righteous way of life they want to be saints in heaven oh they'll be very pleased about that but they don't want to be saints here on earth there's a verse in proverbs 13 4 that says the soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied or to put it in the words of the authorized version the soul of the sluggard desireth and hath nothing and that's that's such an accurate commentary upon

Balaam his soul desired something but in spiritual terms Balaam was a sluggard he had nothing in the end Matthew Henry says that these words of Balaam are only a wish but 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 the means to accomplish or to achieve or to secure the end my friends it is possible to be moved under the preaching of God's word perhaps that's happened to you in the past you sat under a powerful preacher who whose words were clothed with the power of God's spirit and they came to you like a rapier and pierced your heart and pierced your conscience and you felt and knew the power of the truth it was as if

God had taken you up in his hands and was showing you heaven on the one side and hell on the other it's possible my friends to be moved under the preaching of God's word to feel something of the power of the truth in your soul to come under a sense of conviction to feel guilty before God and then to wish for deliverance at the hands of Christ perhaps no clearer example or illustration of that than the character of pliable in Bunyan's pilgrim's progress here was a man who went happily with Christian out of the city of destruction and onto the way that led to the wicked gate and you know pliable loved to listen to Christian telling him what Christian had just read in his book and especially he loved to hear stories about the glory that awaited their arrival in the celestial city let me share an extract of a conversation between

Christian and pliable from pilgrim's progress as they walk on the way the narrow way out of the city of destruction towards the wicked gate the narrow gate Christian says there is an endless kingdom to be inhabited and everlasting life to be given to us that we may inhabit that kingdom forever well said said pliable 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 oh 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 what company shall we have there there we shall be with seraphims and cherubims creatures that will dazzle your eyes to look upon 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 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 and yet and yet just a few moments after saying these very words pliable and christian fall into the sly of despond and then 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 sly which was next to his own house so he went away and christian saw him no more my friends there is a world of difference isn't there there is an eternity of difference between having the notions of a saint or a christian of having the opinion of a saint or a christian of having the wishes and aspirations of a saint and a christian and having the resolution of a saint or a christian don't be a balaam and only wish and not pray that you might die the death of the righteous that your last end might be like his don't have the opinion and the experience of a man like pliable who when

[39 : 47] the going gets tough or when he meets discouragements because of his sin and guilt he turns back and he's never seen again but have the resolve that will lead you to get down on your knees and to pray that God might have mercy upon you how can we get this kind of resolve that is prepared not only to long for the the goal the end of the Christian life and experience but it's prepared to give oneself to the means to secure that end will sit regularly under the sound of

God's word and when you come to church when you tune in to church on the internet before you do so pray that the Lord will make himself and his saving ways known to you take up the words of the psalmist and ask him to send forth his light and his truth that they might guide your steps into the way of life and pray that his word that calls you to seek his face respond to that word in prayer by saying Lord your face I will seek and remember the promise that God has made as you pray all who seek me will find me when they seek for me with all their heart not like

Balaam but like a true Christian someone who seeks the Lord with all their heart genuinely longs to be saved to be delivered from their sin in fact that's the next point as well when you ask the Lord to save you remember what that involves the words of Isaiah 55 6 and 7 should always be at the forefront of your mind what a wonderful invitation it offers to us seek the Lord but there's a time limit on that isn't there seek the Lord while he may be found call upon him what an invitation but remember there's an expiry date why he is near and then verse 7 gives you further instruction you've got to pay attention to these terms and conditions let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts this was the problem with

Balaam he was not prepared to forsake his wicked ways he was not prepared to forsake his unrighteous thoughts let him return to the Lord says Isaiah and what encouragement there is for us to do that because the Lord may have compassion on him and to our God for he will abundantly pardon and join with the people of God God has ordained to save a multitude not a multitude of isolated individuals but he has ordained to bring them into a body a single body the church and he has done that because it's not good for us to be alone we need the mutual support and encouragement of Christian people of fellow believers in the church they will encourage us on our way to heaven they will encourage us to forsake our sins they will encourage us to keep on trusting in the Lord and obeying his commandments patience patiently wait on the Lord and his ordinances this is one of the great curses of this period of lockdown we haven't been able to enjoy the benefits and blessings of the

Lord's supper patiently wait on the Lord ask him to reveal himself in the breaking of bread and in the drinking of the cup this will strengthen us on our way to heaven and look for and hasten and keep in mind the Lord's return when we celebrate the Lord's supper it is until he comes and then we'll have no more need of it but the Lord's supper points backwards to Christ's death but forwards to his coming again and the prayer of the church in the New Testament is come Lord Jesus even so come Lord Jesus when we think of Paul's words to the Thessalonians they were they were saved from idols to serve the living God and to wait for his son from heaven when he raised from the dead

[45 : 57] Jesus who rescues us from the wrath to come their focus was always looking forward in anticipation and in the certainty of Christian hope in the coming again of Jesus Christ the resurrection of the dead and the transportation of the believers into glory knowing what we are going to will encourage us to forsake our sins pay the price of following a crucified saviour in this world and of pressing on until the one who is coming comes and then you will be able to say with an assurance that Balaam was never able to experience because he was a conflicted double-minded man let me die the death of the upright and let my end be like his may God bless his word to us let us pray our heavenly father we pray that your spirit will take these words and that your words will be life for those who hear them we pray that you will help us look away from ourselves to the

Lord Jesus Christ that we might call upon his name and that all who call upon the name of the Lord will depart from iniquity may there be no Balaam's amongst those who heard your word this evening but may we be those who truly like the pilgrims and believers of old hold fast to the Lord and walk in his ways hear us gracious God for Christ's sake Amen Amen for Amen of