

Let me die the death of the righteous

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Preacher: Jonathan Watson

[0 : 00] Friends, I'm going to go straight into the message this morning, which is taken from Numbers chapter 23. If you have your Bibles there, please turn to this remarkable passage tucked in this section of the book of Numbers.

Our text, if we have a text, is the end of, the words that are found at the end of Balaam's first article, let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his.

I don't think anyone knows who it was that coined the phrase, but it has become a fairly well-known proverb in the English language, that 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? That's a sobering question, but there's an even more sobering question to ask.

How many people are there in hell today whose wish it was, when they were alive, to be in heaven when they died?

[1 : 29] The road to hell is paved with good intentions. There is a man in that great number who are in hell today whose name is Balaam.

On the face of it, that might be something of a surprise to us that a man like him ended up in hell.

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

And did we not just read these remarkable words of Balaam at the end of that prophecy when he said, let me die the death of the upright and let my end be like his?

And with those words ringing in our ears, we think to ourselves, how can it be possible that a man who was used by God to utter such remarkable prophecies of the Spirit, a man whose mouth spoke such elevated and pious words, should end up in hell suffering the wrath and judgment of God forever?

[3 : 18] Balaam was a conflicted man, a double-minded man, if you will, a man whose head pulled him in one direction, but whose heart pulled him in the opposite.

Balaam was a Gentile seer or soothsayer who practiced divination. He was a prophet for hire whose reputation must have been considerable because Balak, the king of Moab, knew all about him and were to find him away up north in Mesopotamia near the great river Euphrates, hundreds and hundreds of miles from where Balak lived.

He sent two successive sets of messengers to Balaam with a call and a promise of reward if he would only come and curse the people of Israel for him.

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 God would have him speak.

It seems that Balaam's heart yearned for the financial reward on offer from Balak.

[4 : 50] And it was a case of the Lord, I think, giving him his request but sending leanness into his soul as Psalm 106 verse 15 says.

But the Lord was angry with Balaam and sent his angel's 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 and deeply ironic that the stupidest animal saw the truth that this seer was blind to?

And so his eyes were opened and he saw the angel and he fell down on his face and he confessed his sin. He even offered to turn back if it is evil in your sight.

If, if, if even it is evil in your sight, I'll turn back. But you see, even as he confesses to God, his heart's leaning is clear for all to see how conflicted he is.

[6 : 07] But the angel allows him to proceed because God has a greater purpose in view. And so he comes to Balak and they arrange this ostentatious over-the-top religious ceremony building seven altars and offering up seven bulls and seven rams, the most expensive animals that could be used in sacrifice.

Why do they do it? Well, they're trying to twist God's arm. They're doing their best to win God over to their side so that Balaam can curse the Israelites.

But God is not in the control or in the pay of mortal men. Not even great men like Balak the king of Moab.

The word God puts in Balaam's mouth confounds them both. And rather than bringing a curse on the Israelites, Balaam pronounces them blessed.

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 our meditation for this morning.

[7 : 19] Who can count the dust of Jacob? That's an echo, isn't it, of the promise made to Abraham that his offspring would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore? Or who can number the fourth part of Israel?

Let me die the death of the upright and let my end be like his. What a wish. What a noble aspiration.

What a fine, good intention. Let me die. Oh, I want to die the death of the righteous. I want my end to be like his.

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

The first is the most obvious. Death is common to all. For the upright or righteous, they die, but the wicked also die as well.

[8 : 34] Ever since sin entered into the world, death has been the experience of the entire human race. In Paul's words, in Adam, all die.

Or the writer to the Hebrews, it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment. death. Over the past couple of years, we've heard a lot about death and death rates.

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 that is true whether you're good or bad, whether you're religious or irreligious, whether you're a churchgoer or an occasional churchgoer, whether you're rich or poor, whether you're black or white or any other color, whether you're Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, whatever, whether you're a man or a woman, boy or girl, in Adam, all die.

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 called a global pandemic, when there has hardly been a day when the grim death count has not been broadcast on the television, it is still possible for us not to think seriously about the reality of our death and our dying.

[10 : 43] J.C. Ryle once wrote, there is nothing so certain as death, but nothing so uncertain as the time of dying.

Therefore, he says, I will be prepared at all times for what may come at any time. last year, I think it was, Heather and I were back in our hometown of Bangor for the first time in probably 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, their graves were not too far apart.

And as we walked up and down the neat rows of new headstones, I couldn't help but notice that so many of those who were recently buried in that cemetery were born in years that are getting very close to the year that I was born.

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 is like the flower of grass.

[12 : 11] The grass withers and the flower falls. Or the words of David in Psalm 90, or Moses in 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 gain a heart of wisdom.

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 that we all die, that 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 Christ alone for salvation.

All die. That's the first thing we see in Balaam's words. The second thing, to draw it from these words of Balaam in Numbers 23.10, is that death is not the end of our existence.

[13 : 28] Balaam knew this truth. Though an ungodly man who loved the world and the things of the world, he knew that the human soul is immortal.

It is not snuffed out or extinguished when the body dies, but it continues to exist forever. Surely his words make absolutely no sense whatever if death is the end of everything.

Ask yourself, why does this man want to die the death of the righteous? And why does he want his end to be like the righteous man's end?

Surely it is because he knew deep down in his bones 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, though Balaam didn't enjoy the full light and knowledge that we have, who have the full revelation of God and Christ in the New Testament Scriptures, nevertheless, he was a man who didn't want to die in his present state and condition.

[14 : 46] 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 so, I'll use the words of the shorter catechism, which so admirably sums up the whole teaching of Scripture in these points.

Question 19 asks, what's the misery of that estate wherein to man fell? And it sums up Scripture's teaching by saying, all mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all the miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever.

Sin brings us into a miserable state in which we have no communion with God, or under his wrath and curse, made liable to all the miseries of this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever.

Question 37 asks, what benefits do believers receive from Christ at death? And it sums up Scripture's teaching by saying, 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 then, what benefits do believers receive from Christ at the resurrection? 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.

[16 : 39] the pains of hell forever. Made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God forever.

What a contrast. Death is not the end, and Balaam knew it, and he wished to die the death of the righteous, and he wished his latter end to be like the righteous, because he knew that there was life after death.

And then the third point that we can bring out from these words. It's one thing to have clear opinions of saving truth, and it's another thing to resolve, to be saved in the light of that saving truth.

Look at this man, Balaam. His opinions were better than his resolutions.

For he says, let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his, but he makes no effort to see his wish fulfilled.

[18 : 32] And as we read later on in the scriptures, Numbers 30 verses 8 and 16, Balaam sided with the Moabites. He couldn't pronounce a curse on the Israelites as Balak wanted, but he could counsel Balak concerning a way to destroy the Israelites, through intermarriage with the Moabites, and through eating their sacrifices, sacrifice dedicated to their own idols, which brought a terrible plague, you remember, upon the Israelites in which tens of thousands of them were killed as a result.

And in the New Testament, we read that Balaam's name is a byword for false prophecy, false teaching, and sexual immorality.

So what can we draw from this? Well, it's really tragic beyond words to say that there are many in this world, in the church, in the free church, perhaps, 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 don't want their way to be like that of the righteous.

They have a wish 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, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.

[20 : 43] In the authorized version, the soul of the sluggard desireth and hath nothing. See the difference? The Puritan commentator Matthew Henry says that these words of Balaam are only a wish, not a prayer.

And he says that he only wishes for the end without any care or concern for the means to achieve the end. My friends, it is possible to be moved under the preaching of God's word.

It's possible to feel something of the power of the truth. It's possible to come under a sense of conviction and even a sense of guilt.

it's possible even to wish for deliverance at the hands of Christ and yet fall short of being saved.

Think of the character Pliable and Bunyan who went happily with Christian out of the city of destruction on the way to the wicked gate.

[22 : 08] Pliable loved to listen to Christian. Tell him what he had read in his book, the Bible. And especially he loved to hear of the glory that awaited their arrival in the celestial city.

Here's a little snippet of the conversation on the way. Christian says, there is an endless kingdom to be inhabited and everlasting life to be given us that we may inhabit that kingdom forever.

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

This is very pleasant, says Pliable. 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 on them.

[23 : 21] 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.

That 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.

But just a few moments later, just a few moments after saying these words, pliable and Christian fall into the sly of despond, and we read, at this Pliable began to be offended and angrily said to his fellow, is this the happiness you told me all this while off?

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

[24 : 53] 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.

His heart was ravished with what he heard of the gospel. He had a desire to be in heaven.

But he had no resolution or determination to see that desire fulfilled. My friends, there's a world of difference.

There's an eternity of difference between having an opinion of a saint or a Christian and having the resolution of a saint or of a Christian.

Balaam, false prophet that he was, has so much to teach us.

[26 : 00] How can we get that resolve? By giving yourself to the means of grace that God has provided for you?

by sitting regularly under the sound of the word of God? Praying as we listen to the word of God that God would send forth his light and his truth that they may guide our steps into the way of life.

Pray, pray, pray. His word calls to you saying, seek my face. Let your response be, your face, Lord, I will 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 unlike Balaam, turn from your sin to the Lord.

Because while the Lord says, seek the Lord while he may be found and call upon him while he is near, he also says, let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts.

[27 : 06] Let him return to the Lord that he may have compassion upon him and to our God for he will abundantly pardon. Then, as you look to Christ, steadfastly looking away from yourself to him alone, you'll be able to say with an assurance that Balaam never experienced, let me die the death of the righteous.

And let my end be like his. Let us pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word, for the promises that it contains, for the examples it sets before us, but also for the warnings that shine like beacons warning us of the rocks upon which we can make shipwreck of our lives.

Help us, O Lord, to grasp the truth that we have been thinking about this morning, so that none of us will be mere hearers of your word, good, but that all of us may be doers of it also.

The Lord Jesus Christ said to his disciples, now that you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

May we not only wish to go to heaven when we die, but may we have the resolve, the holy resolve, and may we strive to enter the straight gate, may we always seek the Lord while he may be found, and may our lips actually call upon his name, claiming the promise that whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

[29 : 32] Lord, make your word fruitful in every life here represented, in Jesus' name, Amen.