

"Balaam's Donkey"

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[0:00] Good morning, church. Thank you for your prayers. While Beth and I were away on vacation! these last two weeks, it's good to be back with you all. Would you turn with me to Numbers! 22. Numbers! 22. That's page 121 in the Pew Bible, or roundabout there. And let me pray as we come to God's Word. Father, there are so many things that fill our vision these days, Lord, and so many means whereby we can distract ourselves with what we see and what we consume. Lord, what a clarifying prayer it is to say that we want You to be our vision, O ruler of all. And thank You, God, that by the instrument of Your Word, You again direct our gaze up to You, our good and holy and loving King. So help us as we now come to Your Word that by Your Spirit You would open our eyes to see You, Christ, in all Your glory and to know what it truly means to be human, to know what it truly means to live the life that You intend us to live as Your image bearers. We pray this in Jesus' name, Father. Amen.

All right, Numbers 22. I want to begin by reading the first 14 verses of chapter 22. 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 the Israelites 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 Baor 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 Balaam and said, 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? 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.

[3:25] 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. Okay, let's pause there. Now imagine for a moment that you're an athlete, and it's the morning before the big game. Maybe you're a basketball player, and later that day is the state championship. You're nervous, you're excited, and your coach has gathered your team to get you ready for the challenge ahead. And imagine if at that moment, if your team at that moment could then see what was happening in the opposing team's locker room. Imagine you could hear their plans and see the strategies that they were coming up with. Well, if that wasn't downright cheating, right, that sort of information would be priceless, wouldn't it? Or imagine that you were a military general or a soldier, and you could see behind the enemy lines and know exactly what your enemy forces were up to. That sort of information would be golden, wouldn't it? Well, Numbers 22 gives us just that.

It's a glimpse behind the enemy lines. As the new generation of Israelites in the wilderness prepare to move ahead and travel towards and into the promised land, here for a moment in the narrative, we get to see what's going on in the enemy camp, particularly the enemy camp of Moab and the

Midianites, one of the nations, some of the nations that are gathered against them. And this section of Numbers, starting here in chapter 22, it's going to continue through 23 and 24, which we'll look at next week, but this whole section of Numbers, it's meant to encourage God's people.

It's meant to encourage us. And today, as Numbers kind of takes us behind the enemy lines, we're going to see two things that are meant to encourage us as God's people today. And those two things are this. First, we're going to see that the Lord is determined to bless His people.

And second, we're going to see that the Lord humbles the proud and exalts the humble. So let's look at those two things. The first thing that we see is in verses 1 through 14 that we just read. The Lord is determined to bless His people. Now, what's happening here in these verses? Well, Balak, the king of Moab, sees the people of Israel, and he knows that he doesn't stand a chance against them in battle. So what does he do? Well, he decides to call in a secret weapon. He decides to call in supernatural aid. Balaam. Balaam, who has a reputation, apparently, for being a prophet for hire. And apparently, he has a pretty decent track record, right? The word on the street is that anybody Balaam blesses will be blessed, and anybody that Balaam curses will be cursed. So he's a pretty good guy to maybe hire as a mercenary, sort of a spiritual mercenary for your team. So King Balak decides to call him in. Balaam works for a fee, and Balak is willing to pay a handsome sum to have him come curse the people of Israel. But what happens? Balak's messengers come to Balaam, and Balaam says, well, let me see what God has to say. And God says this to Balaam in verse 12, very clearly, God says, you shall not go with them. You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.

[7:49] Now, just imagine that. You see behind the lines of your enemy, and you see them hiring a special weapon to curse you and to foil you, and what happens instead?

God shows up, and in no uncertain terms says that these schemes of the opponent will amount to nothing.

Why? Because the Lord has determined to bless His people. His favor rests upon them, and nothing the world does can change that fact. Not Balak's armies, not Balaam's divination. They can do their worst against God's people, but the Lord has spoken, and it is so. They are blessed. His favor rests upon them, and it will not be revoked. His purposes for them will not falter and will not fail. He will protect them, preserve them, and bring them all the way to His appointed end in the promised land.

And hasn't that been the story of Numbers so far, friends? Even despite the people's rebellion, even despite the discipline and judgment that they needed to face, God has remained true to His promises into His people. Here they are on the plains of Moab, standing right near the Jordan, a massive people renewed, ready to enter in. But this hasn't just been the story of Numbers. It's been the whole story of the Bible up until this point. This is what God promised to Abraham all the way back in Genesis 12, right? After the Tower of Babel and human pride scatters humanity, after the fall seems to be reaching the ends of the earth, God shows up, comes to Abraham and says, Abraham, it's through you that my blessing is going to reign as far as the curse is found. God blesses Abraham and blesses his offspring and promises that in Abraham's offspring, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. And do you hear in that blessing echoes of the very opening chapters of the Bible?

When the sovereign and holy and wonderful God is calling forth everything into existence, what does He speak after each of those creation days? Blessing. It's good. It's good. It's good.

[10:42] And then He creates humanity, and it's very good. Oh, that blessing that humanity lost because of sin, God has been at work to reestablish. And if God is at work to reestablish it, then nothing the enemy might do is going to thwart it, you see.

And this promise that began in creation and was renewed to Abraham, and we see persevering through numbers, where does it lead? Well, this promise to Abraham's offspring was ultimately fulfilled through the Lord Jesus Christ. Because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, fully God and fully human.

All who are in Him through faith are blessed with Abraham's blessing. It's through Christ that this blessing comes. He is the true offspring of Abraham. And through faith in Him, we can all be included in that blessing that runs throughout Scripture. Blessed with what? With material wealth and fame? No, those things are fleeting and passing, and everyone who gets them knows it. What is the blessing we seek as humans? What is the blessing we need? Well, it's the blessing that Christ has opened for us, the blessing of a right standing with God, the blessing of assurance of God's unwavering favor, and the blessing of certain hope that we will enter the true promised land.

That is, when Christ returns, we will be raised anew in a completely renewed creation where all the effects of the fall, sin and sickness and death and decay and hell and judgment are no more, and we reign with God forever.

The Lord is determined to bless His people. He sent His own Son to secure it, and Christ died and rose again to win it and purchase it for all who believe. And nothing that the world, the flesh, or the devil can do will overturn that blessing in Christ if you are in Him. Now, this blessing of God doesn't mean that life will be easy in a fallen world, does it? There will be trials. There will be suffering. There will be setbacks. Consider the book of Psalms, right? I remember a wise old preacher one time said that the book of Psalms begins with blessing, it ends with joy, and it's a long road in between.

If you've ever read the Psalms, you know that's true, right? And that's true of the Christian life, right? It begins in blessing in Christ. You're fully accepted by the Father. You're adopted into God's family, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and the Christian life ends in joy. You will live eternally with God in whose right hand are pleasures forevermore, but in between. It's a long road.

[14:07] And Numbers has been showing us the ups and downs of that long road, hasn't it? As we battle with want and deprivation and grumbling, challenges outside of us, besetting sin inside of us.

And yet the spiritual blessings that we have in Christ, the love of our Heavenly Father for us mean that even the trials, even the sufferings, even the setbacks are for our good.

in the Father's hand, even the trials of life are carving out a deeper reservoir in our souls that will be filled with His joy. Even the trials will be turned for our good and for His glory.

So the schemes of Balak won't and can't stand against God's people here on the plains of Moab, just as the schemes of this world will never stand against God's people of any age.

The world may want to curse God's people. The world may want to scorn or despise God's people, but ultimately these curses will fall powerless before the Lord's determination to bless His people.

[15:30] And after all, if we have the Lord's favor, why worry, why fret so much if the world thinks the church foolish or strange?

The approval of the world, the blessing of the world means nothing compared to the approval of God. Imagine, imagine being shown favor by the head of state, whomever that may be in whatever country, knowing that you have access to the most powerful, influential person in the whole country, and yet then being so upset when, you know, some person low on the totem pole thinks, ugh.

Right? Friend, you have the approval of God. The world's approval is here today and gone tomorrow, but the favor of God will last forever.

The world's scorn can do nothing to you if you have the favor of God, the blessing of God in Christ, and God grants it freely to all who receive His Son, to all who look to Christ in faith.

But there's more to this story in Numbers 22. Not only is the Lord determined to bless His people, but we also see here that the Lord humbles the proud and exalts the humble.

[16:58] Let's pick up the story in verse 15. Once again, Balak sent princes, more in number and more honorable 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 honor, 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 two, 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 hand, 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 a side out of the road and went into the field.

[18:13] 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 or the 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. Then the angel of the Lord went away 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 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.

[19 : 25] And he bowed down and fell on his face. 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 for 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 these men, but speak only the word that I tell you. So Balaam went on with the princes of Balak.

Now, we're going to pick up the story next week from there. But for now, let's consider the part we just read. I think there are two questions that kind of confront us right away in this section of Numbers, right?

[20 : 30] First, why is God's anger kindled at Balaam in verse 22? On the surface, it seems like Balaam is just doing what God told him in verse 20.

But, if we look a little closer, you realize it's not quite that simple. Balaam isn't as innocent as he appears on the surface.

Look back with me at verse 13 in the passage we started with. Did you notice there in verse 13 what Balaam doesn't say when he tells Balak's men that he can't go with them?

Oftentimes, our silences say a lot more than the things that we say, right? What does Balaam leave out? Well, he leaves out everything that God said about his determination to bless his people.

Instead, Balaam simply says, well, the Lord refused to let me go with you. Not, the Lord's going to bless these people no matter what, so there's no way I can go with you. Instead, Balaam sort of leaves that door open, doesn't he?

[21 : 36] After all, friends, Balaam is not a good guy in this story, right? He is a religio-political prophet for hire.

He sells his oracles to the highest bidder. People pay him money to bless and curse in order to manipulate their circumstances. People don't come to Balaam because he's holy.

They come to Balaam because he's willing to give you what you want if the price is right. And so, he conveniently leaves out that the Lord's never going to curse these people and that leaves the door open for Balaam to make a little bit of a better offer.

And lo and behold, that's exactly what happens. Balaam sends more prestigious messengers the second time with presumably more money to try to persuade Balaam to come along. And look at how Balaam responds in verse 18.

At first, it sounds pretty good, right? Balaam says basically, look, Balaam couldn't give me a billion dollars to go against what the Lord says. That's where he begins. But then in verse 19, what does he say?

[22 : 41] But, you know, let's just stick around and see what God has to say, right? Well, I thought that he was going to obey exactly what the Lord said and the Lord's already said don't go with him.

And now he says, well, I'll do what the Lord says, but, you know, let's see if the Lord will change his mind seeing the piles of money, seeing the prestige that's gathered all around him. You see, Balaam sees the wealth, he sees the prestige of the people who have come to him and he thinks, well, maybe God will change his mind.

Oh, I hope God changes his mind. You know, later biblical writers will look back at the Balaam story and discern that what was driving Balaam wasn't a desire to please the Lord, but a desire for

wealth.

Describing false teachers in his own day, the Apostle Peter writes this in 2 Peter 2.15. He says, forsaking the right way, they've gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Baor, who loved gain from wrongdoing.

So Balaam isn't listening and obeying the Lord when he tells this second group to stay. He's holding out for his own gain. And that leads to verse 20.

[23 : 59] At first, it looks like God is commanding Balaam to go so long as he does what God tells him to do. So why does God get angry in verse 22? Well, I think for the simple reason because God sees that Balaam's motivation in going isn't obedience, but wealth and worldly reputation.

Balaam doesn't want to please and glorify the Lord. He wants to please and glorify himself. He talks a good game, but God sees his heart. God sees that Balaam is really serving money and prestige and not God's own word.

So God's anger is kindled. And that leads to the second question of this passage. the talking donkey. I mean, a talking donkey, right?

It immediately seems too far-fetched to be true, right? I mean, suddenly we're in the middle of Shrek, right, with a talking donkey. But friends, if God can send ten plagues upon Egypt, if God can part the Red Sea, if God can miraculously feed thousands of people in a desert, if God can cause water to come from a rock, if God can cause the things that exist to come into being out of nothing, and if God can cause all things to be held up in their being and not fall into nothingness, if that's how sovereign God is, then putting words into the mouth of a donkey isn't really all that hard to do, is it?

So if we've been paying attention to the story of the Bible so far, we start to realize two things. On the one hand, this is an easy thing for the God of the Bible to do.

[25 : 53] But on the other hand, this isn't a common thing that God does. In fact, in the whole of Scripture, there are only two talking animals, the serpent in the garden and Balaam's donkey, which means that the talking donkey in Numbers 22 should surprise us.

If you're a careful reader of Scripture, you shouldn't be saying, there it is again, more talking animals. No! Suddenly we're thinking, what is going on here? What is God up to?

It should surprise us, not because God can't do it or it's impossible, but because God is clearly doing something unique. He's making a point.

And what's the point? Why put words into the donkey's mouth? Hebrew scholar Ian Duguid puts it like this.

He says, it's often the case that the Lord reveals himself to the weak and foolish while remaining hidden from those who possess the wisdom of this world.

[27 : 06] It is often the case that the Lord reveals himself to the weak and foolish while remaining hidden from those who possess the wisdom of this world.

Balaam, Balaam, the international expert on spirituality and theology. He knew all the rituals and rites. His reputation was widespread.

He was the LeBron James of the religious political world, right? But for all his reputation, for all his prestige, he was blind to the Lord when the Lord stood right in front of him.

But who really sees in this passage? The donkey. Balaam's pride and greed make him less spiritually aware than the beast of burden that he rode upon.

The donkey has more spiritual sense than he does, and by God's grace, the donkey actually saves Balaam's life. And friends, it is still the case that the Lord reveals himself to the weak and foolish while remaining hidden from those who possess the wisdom of the world.

[28 : 29] The Lord is determined to bless his people, but the Lord will humble the proud and exalt the humble. the only way into the people of God is to admit that our wisdom and our strength are not what make us right to God.

Only the foolishness of the cross is what can reconcile sinners to God. Listen to how Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians chapter 1.

Kunle mentioned this passage earlier in the service. Let me read this for us. Paul says, For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart. Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe?

Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

[29:44] For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.

but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brothers and sisters. Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards. Not many were powerful. Not many were of noble birth, but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.

God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

And because you are in Christ Jesus who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that as it is written, let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.

[31:08] You see, friends, the gospel cuts both ways, doesn't it? On the one hand, the gospel humbles us. Like Balaam's donkey, the gospel tells us that our wisdom and our strength doesn't get us any closer to God.

In fact, they're just as likely to drive us away from God because of our pride. But on the other hand, the gospel brings deep comfort, even boldness.

Like Balaam's donkey, the gospel tells us that God chooses the weak and lowly to shame the strong. In other words, God delights to save sinners, to save the undeserving, the lost, the lowly, the humble, and God delights to use them for His kingdom purposes.

If God can use a donkey, how much more will He use you? Beloved children whom Christ died to save.

You see, friends, you don't need to be a renowned scholar or a world-famous leader to be used mightily of God. You simply need to be soft-hearted to God's Spirit and God's words.

[32:23] By the Spirit, God's words will open your eyes to see His beauty. They'll make you wise with the wisdom the world can't give. They'll fill you with hope and courage to obey with love.

And above all, the Spirit will open your eyes to see Christ Jesus, the One who is wisdom, righteousness, and true glory. God humbles the proud, but He exalts the humble.

How about you, friend? Do you think you're above other people? Do you think God owes you something? Do you think through your worldly wisdom you'll reach into the highest heavens and bring God down?

Why not find yourself in a better place beside Balaam's donkey? Letting Him open your eyes to see who He really is and to praise Him.

Let's pray. Father in heaven, thank You that You reveal Yourself to the weak and to the lowly. Lord, how difficult it is for us to be weak and to be lowly.

[33:37] too often we are like Balaam, wanting to maneuver and connive our way through the world and through religious things. O Lord, by Your Spirit, humble us.

Help us to see that the message of the cross, though foolishness to the world, is real wisdom because in it Your wisdom and Your power are displayed. Your saving purposes are accomplished and Your redemption is sealed.

Lord, help us to walk in the assurance of Your blessing and to walk in true humility, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen.