

"Balaam's Blessing"

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[0:00] All right, friends, would you turn with me to Numbers, chapters 23 and 24. That's page 121 or 122 in some of the newer Pew Bibles. Numbers 23 and 24, page 121.

They've been in the wilderness for 40 years, facing many trials, some of them simply because of their difficult circumstances, some of those trials because of their own sin and moral failures. But at this point, where we've come to in the book of Numbers, chapters 23 and 24 in this part of the book, the new generation has risen up. And this new generation is on the verge of the promised land.

They're about to leave the wilderness behind. And yet, that doesn't mean that the trials and the challenges are all behind them.

They still face the daunting prospect of crossing the Jordan and entering the land. There are enemies ahead, trials ahead, hardships ahead. But it's not just difficult circumstances that await them.

[1:19] This new generation, too, will have to grapple with their own moral failings and their own internal shortcomings. And so, as they face, this new generation faces these external and internal trials, where, where will their confidence come from?

Where will they find the confidence to move ahead? You know, that question is the same for the church today, for us today. Hardships, right, are inevitable in life.

Challenges and trials, without and within. Where will we get the confidence to face them? Well, this is where Numbers 23 and 24 comes in.

And these chapters, we're picking up the story of Balak and Balaam. Balak, you'll remember from last week, is the pagan king of Moab, who sees the people of Israel gathered on the verge of the promised land, and is afraid of them, wants to defeat them, so he wants to curse them.

And in order to do that, he goes and finds Balaam, a sort of prophet for hire, and calls Balaam in to do the cursing. It's an interesting scene in the book of Numbers, because the narrator sort of takes us into the camp of the enemy nations.

[2:41] And there, in the camp of those who want to curse Israel, it seems like a strange place to find confidence in the face of trials, right? But that's exactly what we do find.

Because even there, in the midst of the enemy camp, we see the Lord's determination to bless his people and to make his blessings known. Three times in these chapters, Balak will try to get Balaam to curse Israel.

And three times, Balaam will come back, not with a curse, but with the Lord's blessing. And then, at the end of chapter 24, Balaam will give a fourth and final blessing.

The enemy wants to curse God's people, but God's blessing prevails. The final word belongs to the Lord, and that word over his people is a word of favor.

But, as we think about the broad scope of these chapters that we'll dive into in just a second, what exactly does this blessing consist of?

[3:46] What is the nature and content of this blessing that God speaks over his people, even through the mouth of his enemies? And how can the particular content and contours of that blessing help us today to face trials with confidence?

Well, let's jump into the story to find out. Now, for context, we're going to start in verse 36 of the previous chapter, chapter 22. So, if you have your Bible open, jump up a couple paragraphs.

All this will be on the screens above, too. Chapter 22, verse 36. But before I read, let's go ahead and pray. Father, help us as we come to your word to hear these blessings afresh and to understand them afresh in Jesus Christ, our Lord, so that we, too, might move ahead as your people in confidence, even in the midst of trials.

We pray this in Christ's name. Amen. All right, Numbers 22, picking up in verse 36. Remember last week.

There's a whole story there. You should go back and read it. And Balaam said to Balak, behold, I have come to you. Have I now any power of my own to speak anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I must speak. Then Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-azoth.

[5:05] And Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep and sent for Balaam and the princes who were with him. And in the morning, Balak took Balaam and brought him to Bamoth-Bal. And from there, he saw a fraction of the people.

And Balaam said to Balak, build for me here seven altars and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams. Balaam 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 to you. And he went to a bare height. And God met Balaam. 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.

[6:09] Come, curse Jacob for me and come denounce Israel. How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced?

For from the top of the crags I see him. From the hills I behold him. Behold, a people dwelling alone and not counting itself among the nations. Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel?

Let me die the death of the upright and let my end be like his. And Balak said to Balaam, What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies and behold, you've done nothing but bless them.

And Balaam answered and said, Must I not take care to speak what the Lord puts in my mouth?

Okay, there's the basic narrative structure of the rest of the passage.

We're going to see this repeated a couple times. But we see here the first of four blessings that God speaks over Israel through the mouth of Balaam. Yes, even through the mouth of his enemies, God blesses his people. And this first blessing that is meant to give us confidence in the face of trials is this.

[7:16] It is the blessing of God's faithfulness. The blessing of God's faithfulness. Where do we see that in these verses? Well, we see it in verses 9 and 10.

In verse 9, we're told that God's people are set apart from the nations. They dwell alone. That is, they're distinct. They're set apart from the people around them. But does that mean that they're small and sort of destined to be swallowed up by the stronger nations around them?

No. In verse 10, we're told that they are great in number. Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel? Now, if you've been following the story of the Bible so far, up to this point in the book of Numbers, you'll actually start to recognize that language that God puts into Balaam's mouth here.

It's similar language that he spoke all the way back to Abraham, all the way back in the book of Genesis. You see, God promised Abraham that he would make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the grains on the seashore, as many as the stars in the sky.

And here in Numbers, nearly 400 years after God made that promise to Abraham, as Balaam looks out over just a small fraction of the people, Balaam sees a multitude almost too great to number.

[8:30] And what does that mean? It means that God has been faithful to his promises. This first blessing is the blessing, the assurance of God's faithfulness.

All that God says he will do. God will remain true to his words. And that was true for God's people under the old covenant, and it remains true for God's people in the new covenant today.

He is faithful. The challenges that you and I face, you see, these are not a surprise to God. The trials we face, they might catch us off guard, but not God.

He is working out his good plans. He is keeping his promises no matter what circumstances we face. An unexpected illness, a sudden job loss, a fractured relationship.

None of these wilderness experiences that we face change God's faithfulness one bit. He will never stop working for his glory and for our good.

[9:42] I mean, think about it. How on earth could a band of liberated slaves from Egypt who wandered in the desert for 40 years, possibly at the end of all that, become a people too great to number?

Only because of God's faithfulness. The son of Zipporah. God is not man that he should lie, or a son of man that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it?

Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? Behold, I received a command to bless. He has blessed, and I cannot revoke it. He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob, nor has he seen trouble in Israel. The Lord their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them. God brings them out of Egypt, and is for them like the horns of a wild ox.

For there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel. Now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, what has God wrought? Behold, a people.

[10:41] As a lioness it rises up, and as a lion it lifts itself. It does not lie down until it has devoured the prey and drunk the blood of the slain. Oh, that last image is pretty spicy, isn't it?

You know? A lion rises up, and it refuses to lie down again until it's conquered all its foes and devoured its prey. What a picture that is, isn't it? Of endurance, of strength, of perseverance, of victory in the face of challenges.

When you face trials, when hardships come, do you feel like a lioness or a lion? Ready to persevere, ready to endure, to not lie down until the battle's over and the victory won?

I mean, if we're honest, that's not always how we feel, is it, right? You know? Rather than a lion rising up and never lying down, we just want to sort of curl up in bed and wait for the storm to pass, right?

Our strength fails. Our endurance wanes. So what makes the difference here? How is it that God's people can face trials with confidence and strength and endurance?

[11:52] Well, the answer is found in verse 21. The Lord their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them.

You see, at the heart of the covenant that God makes with His people is this. He says again and again, the very heartbeat of it is, I will be your God, and you will be my people.

I will dwell in your midst. God will be present with His people. The God, remember? The same God who dwells in every place because He is sovereign over all creation.

The God who fills all space with His fullness. The omnipresent and sovereign one. That one promises to be present to His people in a special way. To be present to them as their God.

To be for them. To be fighting for them. To be a shield about them. To be a refuge. To be a rock. The Lord their God is with them. That is the blessing of God's presence.

[12:55] And you see, if you have God's presence in your life, the presence of the Almighty God, the God of all glory and grace, if you have God's presence, what else do you need?

What can't you face if God's presence is with you? I grew up with two older brothers.

They were both athletes, both strong. One of them is 6'6", which when you're growing up, that's like a giant, right? Big dude. And growing up, I knew that when my older brothers were around, when they were present with me, none of my stupid friends were going to give me any trouble.

Right? I might not have been the toughest kid or the coolest kid, but when my big brothers were around, I knew I was going to be okay. Now, maybe it wasn't a big brother for you.

Maybe you've had a boss who saw and appreciated your work in a tumultuous workplace. Or maybe you've had an advisor who championed your research when things were difficult.

[14:05] Maybe you've had a spouse who believed in you when others doubted. And just having that person around in your life gave you confidence to go forward. But don't you see, friends?

If the presence of a loving, strong friend or spouse or boss can give us confidence, friends, how much more does the presence of God Himself, what can't we face if we know that God is with us?

You see, if you have God, then the world can't really take anything from you that ultimately matters. If you have His presence in your life, well, then the presence of health or the presence of money or the presence of reputation, those things can come and go. And you're not shaken.

You can be wealthy or poor. You can be well-liked or despised. You can be healthy or you can be sick. If you have God, then you have all you need. Because His presence is life and light and joy.

[15:18] Oh, yes, trials can often feel like dark clouds, right, that block the rays of the sun at times. They can throw their shadows over us. We can lose sight of God's light and God's presence.

But the presence of God, the light of the sun, never leaves His people. He is with us. So the blessing of God's presence is the second thing that gives us confidence in the face of trials. But it's not just the blessing of God's past faithfulness that gives us confidence. It's not just the blessing of God's presence with us here and now, with us in the present. The third thing we see in this passage is the blessing of God's future hope, the blessing of what God has in store for His people.

As the story continues in Numbers 24, Balak again tries to get Balaam to curse Israel. And for a third time, the Lord again pronounces His blessing. But, you know, this time it's a little different because Balaam does away with the rituals and the rites.

You know, there's no more of this sacrifice, no more of this sort of pagan divination. None of that is needed. Instead, the Spirit of God falls on Balaam. And this is what he says in verse...picking up in verse 2 of chapter 24.

[16:41] Verse 3, actually. Verse 3 of 24.

! So God speaks through Balaam of what the future holds for His people. Did you catch that here? In verse 6, they're going to flourish like palm trees, like cedar. trees, like flowing waters, like gardens beside a river.

Their rule shall still be. Their rule shall still be. Their level will still be. Their level will still be. Their level will still be. Their level will still be. Their level will still be. Their level will still be.

Their level will still be. Their level will still be. Their level will still be. Their level will still be. Their level will still be. Their level will still be. Their level will still be. Their level will still be.

Their level will still be. Their level will still be. Their level will still be. like gardens beside a river.

Their rule shall spread and their kingdom will be exalted." It's this picture of flourishing, of human flourishing. And the language here harkens back all the way to Genesis 2 in the Garden of Eden.

You see, God pictures a future for His people where His creational purposes are fulfilled, where humans are reigning in the world that He has made under His good rule, and creation is singing with joy.

[18:24] Of course, Old Testament Israel's entry into the promised land, that would only be a picture. That would only be a foreshadow of what this promise, this greater promise held, right?

Because Israel would enter the land, and yes, it would be a land flowing with milk and honey for a time, but it would be a land that they eventually lose. Like Adam in the Garden, Israel in the promised land would disobey God. And in the rebellion from God's good rule, they too would be cast out.

And yet, this promise of hope, this blessing of God's future would still remain. God would gather His people from all the places that He scattered them. He would redeem them from exile.

But this ultimate fulfillment, this ultimate return from exile, wouldn't be just a gathering back into the land of Palestine, but it would be what that was always a symbol of, a completely renewed creation. You see, the blessing that God has in store for His people isn't an inheritance in this fallen creation, but an inheritance in the renewed creation, where sin and death and sickness and suffering are no more. The blessing of God's future is the blessing of living in God's healed world, under God's rule, in a creation liberated from the effects of sin and death, liberated from its bondage to the bondage to decay as the Apostle Paul describes it in Romans 8. This promise is the promise of the new heavens and new earth, what John saw at the end of Revelation where God wipes away every tear from our eyes and where sin is forever banished from God's good world. And friends, this hope of glory, this blessing of eternal life with God forever in a sin-free, redeemed creation, this hope, this blessing of God's future is what gives us confidence to face trials now. You see, no matter what we face now, we know that this isn't the end of our story. In fact, these afflictions now are indeed even preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond compare, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians. What trials are you facing today, brothers and sisters? Are you willing to take that trial, whatever it may be, and hold it up for a moment and compare it to the unspeakable glory that awaits you in heaven, in the new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells? When you take that trial, when you compare it to what God has in store for you as His child, as His beloved daughter, His beloved son, as you compare it to the streams of joy that will flow without end when God comes and makes all things new, does it not seem, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians, light and momentary? Paul says these light and momentary afflictions are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond compare. Of

course, these light and momentary afflictions are still afflictions, are they not? They still hurt. They are still hard. We need not minimize them, but you see, we need not maximize them either. Instead, we can face them with confidence.

Face them with confidence because we know that they will not last forever. Now, the only thing that will last forever is the blessing of God's future hope, the future world to come.

[22:21] So we've seen three aspects of this blessing that God speaks over His people, and they're all radically God-centered, aren't they? It's God's faithfulness. It's God's presence. It's God's future. That's the blessing.

But what is it that secures that blessing for us? How can we be sure that this blessing will actually be ours?

I mean, after all, think about it. Who among us really deserves that blessing? I mean, surely we don't deserve God's faithfulness, right? I mean, not when we realize how unfaithful we've been. We've not kept our promises. Why should God keep His to us? I mean, surely we don't deserve God's presence, right? I mean, how often do we live our lives just simply ignoring God in the world that God has made? He surrounds us with His providential care, and we act as if it's our own hard work or good luck that we're to thank. And the only time we think of God is when things go wrong. So we take credit for all the good stuff, and we blame God for all the bad stuff. Do we deserve God's presence in the midst of all that? I mean, surely we don't deserve also God's future hope. I mean, we'd rather try to live for our own pleasure now, right, than live in light of God's world to come. So if we've done so much to forfeit God's blessing, how can we ever be sure that this blessing will actually be ours? Well, there's one more blessing in Numbers 24, and this last blessing comes unprompted by Balak, the king of Moab. Balak's done trying to get Balaam to curse God's people. Balak sends him away, but God sends one more word through Balaam. Through this unlikely, unworthy prophet for hire, God speaks of His greatest blessing to come. Through an unworthy source,

God speaks of His undeserved grace to unworthy people. And what is this fourth and final blessing? Well, quite simply, it's the blessing of His Son.

[24:56] Let's pick up in Numbers 24, verse 15. The oracle of Balaam, the son of Baal, or the oracle of the man whose eye is opened, the oracle of him who hears the words of God and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty falling down with His eyes uncovered. I see Him, but not now.

I behold Him, but not near. A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel. It shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth.

Edom shall be dispossessed. Seir also, his enemies shall be dispossessed. Israel is doing valiantly, and one from Jacob shall exercise dominion and destroy the survivors of the cities.

So what does Balaam see in this final oracle, this final blessing? Well, he sees a king. He sees a king coming out of Israel, a king, a scepter. You know what a scepter is. It's sort of a ruling staff, a star.

And this king will not just need a pagan prophet to bless him. No, this king is going to be victorious over all of Israel's enemies, Moab and Edom and Seir. The rest of the chapter will mention Amalek and Kaan and Ashur. All the threats against God's people will be defeated, and God's people will live in peace. No more threats, no more curses, no more destruction. And yes, as the Old Testament unfolds, kings will arise in Israel. David and his descendants will achieve some amount of victory over some of these earthly enemies of Old Testament Israel. But the greatest enemies will still remain.

[26:52] Because as the Old Testament story progresses, the people begin to see that the real enemy isn't the Moabites or the Amalekites. The real enemy is closer to home. The great enemy of God's people aren't the threats on the outside, but the even greater problem on the inside. It's the enemy of sin.

That is what really threatens to undo us, for it's sin that separates us from God. It's sin that places us under the most dreadful of curses, the curse of God's law against sin, the law of God that justly pronounces eternal death for all those who rebel against the goodness of the eternal God.

God's law against the Lord. And who could conquer that enemy on behalf of God's people? Could there be a king that could rescue God's people from their own sin? The good news, friend, is that there is such a king, a king, and he has come, and his name is Jesus, God's own Son, descended from David, born of Mary, born under the law, to redeem us from the curse of the law against our

sin. Because Jesus lived a sinless life as our representative, and on the cross he became a curse for our sin as our substitute. And on the third day he rose again in victory over sin and over death, triumphing for all who repent and trust in him.

Isn't it interesting, do you remember who some of the first worshipers are of Jesus in the New Testament? Who are they? Do you remember? Matthew 1, Matthew 2? Pagan astrologers from the Far East.

Just like Balaam, groping their way in darkness, a star arises and they come to the king. What a beautiful sign that the star, the scepter has come, the one who will rescue his people from their sin. That is what Jesus' name means. He'll save us. Friends, here's our greatest confidence in the face of trials.

[29 : 21] God has given his own Son for us, and if he has given us his Son, how will he not graciously give us with him all things? If God has given his own self, his own Son for us, how will he also not bless us with his faithfulness, his presence, his future? If God is for us, who can be against us?

As Paul says in Romans 8 that Jamie read for us earlier, what shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No. In all these things, we're more than conquerors through him who loved us. Then Paul says, I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation... That's pretty total, right?

Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, the King. Do you know that blessing, friend? The blessing of the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It's extended to you freely today. Today you can take hold of Christ, know that he has forgiven all your sins and given you his unshakable blessing. And Christians, as we come to the Lord's Supper this morning, let us take hold once again of this truth that no trial, no hardship can separate us from the only blessing that matters, the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. If we have the Son, then we have everything. Let that be our strength amidst weakness, our joy amidst sorrow, our blessing amidst curses.

[31 : 22] And friends, won't this be one of the greatest ways that we as a body display the beauty and truth of the gospel out to our neighbors and to our world? If we can face trials with confidence because of Christ Jesus our Lord, because nothing can separate us from His love, because if God is for us, then who can be against us? If we can face the trials and sufferings and hardships of life with that kind of confidence, oh, will it not adorn the gospel and make the aroma of Christ flow? That's what the table reminds us of.

He was broken. He was poured out for our sins so that you'll never be broken, friend. You'll never be poured out no matter what you face. That's what the Lord's Supper by the Holy Spirit brings back to our hearts through faith. So let's take a moment and let's ask God to renew our hearts by His Spirit as we come to the table together. Let's pray. Oh, Lord, how we need fresh confidence to face the things before us. Lord, how we need fresh confidence to face not just the things outside of us, but the things inside of us. Lord, we see our own shortcomings and failures. We see the besetting sins and indwelling sins that still cling so closely to us. Lord, how we need the confidence of Your blessing over us, the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Lord, as we come to Your table now, by Your Spirit, be very present to us in these elements, God. As we taste, as we see, as we smell, as we handle these things, would we be reminded of the rich blessing that's ours in Christ? And would it be real to our hearts through faith, we pray in Jesus' name, amen.