

The king of Moab did not like the idea that the children of Israel had camped near his kingdom and wished to drive them away but he knew his army was not strong enough. Thus he hires Balaam, the local soothsayer, to curse the children of Israel so that Moab would have a military advantage. However, the LORD protected His people and would only allow Balaam to pronounce a blessing on Israel.

In Numbers 22 we are introduced to Balaam, a prophet who sold his services to anyone who needed help from the gods. He is described as a soothsayer (someone who practices divination, which is forbidden by the LORD [Deut. 18:10-13]) in Joshua 13:22, indicating that he was not a prophet of the LORD but a spiritualist who interacts with any god required by his clients.

Numbers 22 sets the context for our lesson by telling us that Israel had camped “in the plains of Moab,” which caused Balak, the king of Moab, to become afraid (vs. 1-4). He knew the reputation of Israel and their God and did not think he could defeat them without help, so he sent messengers with “the rewards of divination” to hire Balaam to come and curse Israel (vs. 1-7). After initially forbidding him to go, the LORD gives Balaam permission to meet with Balak on the condition that he only speak what the LORD tells him to say (vs. 8-21). Balaam goes but his motives are for the reward and so the LORD becomes angry and sends an angel to slay Him (v. 22). The ass on which Balaam is riding sees and avoids the angel three times, thus saving Balaam’s life (vs. 23-27a). However, Balaam cannot see the angel and becomes angry at the animal’s behavior. He begins beating the animal until the LORD gives it the ability to speak and reveals the reality of the situation (vs. 27b-33). The LORD allows Balaam to continue his journey to Balak but reminds him that he is only to say what the LORD tells him to speak concerning Israel (vs. 34-35).

Numbers 23

5 And the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth, and said, Return unto Balak, and thus thou shalt speak. 6 And he returned unto him, and, lo, he stood by his burnt sacrifice, he, and all the princes of Moab.

Balak has brought Balaam to a high place used to worship Baal which overlooked the camp of the children of Israel (Num. 22:36-41). In Num. 23:1-4, Balaam has Balak build seven altars and provide seven oxen and seven rams to offer on them. Balaam proceeds to offer an oxen and a ram on each altar and then went to an elevated position to see what the LORD would have him say. Num. 24:1 implies that Balaam was attempting to use enchantments to reach God, something that he undoubtedly used with other gods. Despite the fact that Balaam was seeking the LORD in a pagan manner, the LORD meets with Balaam and gives him what he should say. Balaam returns to where Balak is standing with the princes of Moab beside the altars and delivers the message from the LORD.

7 And he took up his parable, and said, Balak the king of Moab hath brought me from Aram, out of the mountains of the east, *saying*, Come, curse me Jacob, and come, defy Israel.

The Hebrew word for “parable” here can refer to a proverb or a poem. Balak was waiting to hear what Balaam had to say and Balaam is now saying it. He begins by recounting the reason that he was there: Balak had sent for him to come and pronounce a curse on “Jacob” (Israel) and to “defy” (express indignation or to denounce) them. Balak superstitiously believed that pronouncing a curse on Israel would weaken them and allow Moab to defeat them in battle.

8 How shall I curse, whom God hath not cursed? or how shall I defy, *whom* the LORD hath not defied?

Balaam states that he cannot perform the task that Balak has hired him to do. The LORD has blessed Israel and Balaam is powerless to contradict the blessings of God and curse Israel. He is equally unable to denounce the people that the LORD has not denounced. We should rejoice in the knowledge that if we belong to God, no one can supersede His blessings on us as His people. **Rom. 8:31** “*What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?*” The remainder of Romans 8 describes the security we have in Christ against the accusations of the world and Satan.

9 For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him: lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.

“For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him” – Balak had brought Balaam to the top of a hill overlooking the camp of the Israelites, and it is from that elevated position that Balaam can see the people whom God has blessed. **“lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations”** – Balaam comments on the uniqueness of Israel as the LORD’s chosen people. They will not be “reckoned” (counted) among the other nations because the LORD has set them apart. Thus they shall dwell alone under the blessings of God and in the land that the LORD will be giving them.

Verses 10-30: Balak complains that Balaam has done the opposite of what he had been hired to do because he has blessed Israel instead of cursing them. Balaam replied that he could only do say what the LORD had told him to say. Balak then takes Balaam to another hill where he could only see a portion of Israel’s camp in the hopes that the view would not be as intimidating and would enable Balaam to curse them. At the new location they repeat the steps they took at the first location with the seven altars before Balaam steps away to communicate with the LORD. He returns with the message that the LORD gave him to deliver. He declares that the LORD is not like men who do not always do what they say they will do and that often change their minds. The LORD promised to bless Israel and will do so, and there is nothing Balaam can do to change that. Balaam continues to speak blessing on Israel, making allusions to the coming Messiah and an interesting statement of how God has not found iniquity within Israel (grace!). The LORD will protect Israel from all attempts to curse them. Balak is understandably frustrated and says that if Balaam won’t curse Israel then he shouldn’t bless them either. He then takes Balaam to a third location in the hopes that God will change His mind and curse Israel from there. At that location the process starts over with the offering of a bullock and ram on each of the seven altars.

Numbers 24:1-15: Balaam gives up using enchantments to hear from the LORD and instead looks toward the wilderness where Israel was camped. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him and Balaam proclaimed the blessed and prosperous future of Israel. Balak is now furious with Balaam and tells him to go home, blaming the LORD for preventing Balaam from claiming his reward. Balaam replies that he had already informed Balak and his messengers that he could only say what the LORD allowed him to say. He then begins to tell Balak what Israel will do to Moab in the future.

Numbers 24:16-17

16 He hath said, which heard the words of God, and knew the knowledge of the most High, *which saw the vision of the Almighty, falling into a trance*, but having his eyes open:

“He hath said” – The “he” is Balaam (see v. 15).

“which heard the words of God” – The LORD has been telling Balaam what to say.

“and knew the knowledge of the most High” – The LORD had revealed some things to Balaam so that he could prophesy.

“which saw the vision of the Almighty” – God (the Almighty) has given Balaam visions of the future of Israel and Moab.

“falling into a trance, but having his eyes open” – The words “into a trance” are in italics, indicating that they are supplied by the translators. The Hebrew says “falling with his eyes open” which could imply a trance like state as the Spirit of the LORD comes upon Balaam.

17 I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth.

“I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh” – The next line in this verse indicates that the “him” is the Messiah (Christ), Israel’s coming King. Balaam caught a glimpse of the Messiah “but not now” and “not nigh (near).” The coming of this King would be in the future.

“there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel” – A star was a common symbol for a king in ancient times, as was the scepter. This line refers to Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the coming King Who will reign over Israel and all the earth.

“and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth” – The proper interpretation of this line is debated by commentators and translators. Some believe “the corners” refer to the corners of the head and some translations render this as “the forehead of Moab.” Other commentators point out that the Hebrew word for “corners” can mean “sides” and thus say that the literal rendering is “the two sides of Moab” (as in the length and width, i.e. the entire territory of Moab). Equally debated is the phrase “children of Sheth” which some say should be translated as “sons of tumult.” Others say that Sheth refers to Seth, Adam and Eve’s third son and so the meaning refers to all mankind. A third group of commentators believe that Sheth refers to some unknown king or city of Moab. Whichever interpretation is correct, the idea seems to be the total domination that the Messiah’s kingdom will have over Moab and/or the world.

Verses 18-25: Balaam continues his prophecies concerning Israel’s dominance over various nations in the land of Canaan. When he is done, he and Balak go their separate ways.

Numbers 31:1-15: The LORD instructs Moses to fight against Midian in vengeance for the corrupting influence they had on Israel (Numbers 25:1-18). Midian had sent their women into the camp of the Israelites to seduce them and lead them into idolatry. Midian had done this on the advice of Balaam, who, still seeking after reward, knew that if he couldn’t curse Israel then perhaps Israel could cause the LORD to curse them through their sin. During the battle with Midian, Israel killed the five kings of Midian along with Balaam. They killed all the males but spared the women, keeping them as captives. When Israel’s army returned with the female captives, Moses became angry with the officers for not killing these women.

Numbers 31:16

16 Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD.

Moses reminds these officers that the women of Midian were the catalyst of Israel’s sin against the LORD, resulting in a plague that killed 24,000 Israelites (Num. 24:1-18). The women had done this under the advisement of Balaam, who apparently was still seeking the reward that Balak had offered. Balaam’s advice evidently was intended to cause Israel to bring itself under the curse of God since Balaam was powerless to curse them himself and override God’s intention to bless them.

Our God watches over us to protect us from the accusations and curses that the world and Satan seek to bring against us. However, we can push ourselves out from under this umbrella of protection through our disobedience. Sin will cut off the blessings of God in our lives if we are unrepentant, thus we should always be obedient to His will.