

**Numbers 22:1-22**

**Greed won't get you beyond the curse. It is God's blessing that saves and sustains.**

This week our family had the opportunity to be in Big Bear for a retreat with other ministry families partnering with Manna SoCal. It was an encouraging time and such a joy to have the kids along this year.

The teaching for the adults was on living an unhurried life. Living at the pace of grace. And for those whose usual posture is what they might call "holy urgency," it was a timely word.

One of the sessions included a brief time of solitude. Of practicing being still, silent before the Lord and just listening. Paying attention to what the Lord might be saying to you.

Since we were near the lake I figured I would walk during my time. And I set out with the goal of reaching the lake where I presumed glory would be. A nice spot to hear the birds as a reminder of God's presence and maybe, just maybe something from Him about this season of our lives.

In a strange land but how hard could it be to get to the lake! So I set out in the direction that felt right to me. As the sun warmed me I walked through neighborhoods and turned down streets that I was sure would take me to the lake. But with each maneuver, it seemed the lake was out of reach. So I kept walking and searching. Coming even to a road that declared in bright yellow sign brilliance, "No lake access!"

Getting frustrated with the endeavor, I realized I was going after the wrong thing. I was supposed to be listening for the Lord, not reaching a destination. And in his gentle way I heard the Lord say, "The lake is not what I have for you."

I turned then and saw an empty lot of bush and bramble and what was neglected and undervalued took on a different beauty to me.

An important time of redirection, a picture of my life.

What I think is necessary, what I define as “the good life, the perfect situation,” is not what the Lord has in mind... and what he has is always better.

It can take a journey through a strange land, through the wilderness of life to get us to see this. And along the way we may try to create for ourselves “our bliss.” Falling into the ways of the world, aching for “gain” as defined by others stumbling through.

We will even fall under the demonic influence of seeking after self and claiming the highest place of the cosmos for ourselves. Or we veil our own greed in religious speech and words of expanded territory drive us, missing what we are supposed to be seeing.

We still however have our humanity to face, and our need for something beyond us to find meaning and real life.

**Greed won't get you beyond the curse. It is God's blessing that saves and sustains.**

Two points from this story for us today, Greed is not Gain, and The Word of the Lord Rules.

Context - just having come off of significant victories in battle, the humongous Israel has been located on the plains of Moab. Across the Jordan river from their promised home.

The narrative we have here though is surprisingly not told from Israel's perspective.

It is the desires of Balak, the Moabite king, that drives this story, and the response of a “prophet for hire.” Balaam.

Moab sees clearly, they can't beat Israel. If there is war, like the Canaanites, the Amorites and Bashanites, they will fall. They are then “overcome with fear of the people of Israel.” And they need a secret weapon.

They try to hire a curse.

### **Greed is not Gain**

Several years ago we had the opportunity to be at Disneyland on Halloween. Tons of candy, more people. And for such days Disney does something different. The party becomes a Villains night. Where during the day you are hunting for Mickey and his friends to sign your autograph books and take pictures, or your favorite princess, on a Villains night you encounter all the bad guys, the wicked stepmother, Ursula and all the like.

Jarring because it is almost as if you are made to like the villains. But they are still not good.

The same thing is happening here.

Sometimes the way we read what is a bit of a funny story, we almost see Balaam as the hero of the story. We focus on God granting permission and then getting angry, not realizing the evil Balaam represents.

Who is this prophet for hire?

Balaam son of Beor...

**Numbers 22:6** “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.”  
(ESV)

A magician, or conjurer with a reputation for results. Effective. You can imagine an army in this era of the human story, just hearing rumors that you had been cursed by a prophet would take the wind out of your sails.

But Balaam is not a good dude.

A careful reading of this section shows that he is presented very negatively as a money-hungry seer who does his work using ways that the Lord clearly prohibited and whose donkey is more morally upright than he is.

In a warning against false prophets and teachers Peter include the likes of Balaam.

**2 Peter 2:3** “And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. (ESV)

**2 Peter 2:14–16** “They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! [15] Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing, [16] but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet’s madness.” (ESV)

He is a pagan soothsaying for gain, for honor, for greed.

Using the name Yahweh... 22:8 the LORD. Balaam refers to God by his personal name and later speaks of “the LORD my God” (v. 18) as if to say that he really knows God. The narrator uses the more general term “God” (vv. 9, 10, 12, 20) as if to say that Balaam does not know “the LORD.” Which indicates Balaam’s deceitful character...

The elders of Midian and Moab went with fees for divination and came to Balaam. He invites them to lodge there as he speaks with God.

We have no idea how or even why Balaam hears from Yahweh, he is not part of the covenant people, he is not righteous. And while it is for the benefit of Israel that he hears, because he hears we don’t know what to do with Balaam. And maybe that is why we give him undo credit.

I want to say “get Yahweh’s name out of your mouth!”

The work he does smells nothing like Yahweh. He has a price, he lusts after honor that would be given to him.

But God speaks. “Who are these men?” Now, God never asks a question he doesn’t know the answer to.

**Numbers 22:12** “God said to Balaam, “You shall not go with them. You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.” (ESV)

Balaam tells the entourage that God won't let him go but leaves out the key fact - that Israel is blessed.

Balak sends better people with a better offer. [17] “for I will surely do you great honor, and whatever you say to me I will do. Come, curse this people for me.” (ESV)

God seems to permit his going, only he must do what God tells him.

In the next verse we see that God is angry. While we are not explicitly told, I think it is that God knows Balaam's greed. He knows his penchant for leaving out key facts when communicating for payment.

Eventually his eyes are opened to see an angel and is told that his way is reckless. Balaam must “speak only what” the Lord tells him, which suggests that Balaam had been ready to do whatever Balak paid him to do.

A warning for us against doing things in the way of the world.

“The passage does not tell us that the best source of God's guidance is necessarily foreign prophets or donkeys, but it does give us some insight about listening for God's voice. It is easy for us to listen for God's voice only from sources we know. This often means listening only to those people who think like we do, belong to our social circles, or speak and act like us. This may mean we never pay attention to others who would take a different position from us. It becomes easy to believe that God is telling us exactly what we already thought. Leaders often reinforce this by surrounding themselves with a narrow band of like-minded deputies and advisors. Perhaps we are more like Balaam than we would like to believe. But by God's grace, could we somehow learn to listen to what God might be saying to us, even through people we don't trust or sources we don't agree with?” Theology of Work Bible Commentary.

“His besetting sin was greed, as Peter rightly diagnosed it (see 2 Peter 2:15). As a result, he went to Moab with the envoys of Balak instead of sending them on their way with the clear word of the Lord. The Lord gave him over, up to a point, to his

sinful choices. Are we so very different from Balaam though? To what extent do the very same things that Balak offered Balaam — money and prestige — have a grip on our hearts? Are we ourselves free from the love of money, which Paul describes as the root of all evils (1 Timothy 6:10)? If these precise things do not hold our hearts captive, perhaps other idols drive our thinking just as surely: acceptance, physical beauty, intellectual accomplishment, or the like.” ID  
He becomes a joke.

### **Numbers 22:23-30**

This is humorous. We are supposed to laugh a bit when we hear of this encounter. And we are laughing at Balaam, the guy worried about being dishonored when he is trying to get rich.

His donkey is a better seer than he is! And She will tell him about it!

Poignant that we just listened to Magician’s Nephew in Lewis’ Narnia series. Where the animals mouths are first opened by Aslan and the first joke isn’t told but is a creature.

“The first joke in Narnia was the jackdaw. It occurred when all the talking beasts responded to Aslan's command that, because they had been taken out of "dumb", non-talking beasts, they were not to return to that state. All the animals responded with a resounding "No, Aslan, we won't!", but in the brief silence that followed, the jackdaw then called out, "No fear!" causing everyone to laugh.

At first the jackdaw was embarrassed, but when Aslan told them they were free to laugh and joke, the jackdaw proudly asked if he had made the first joke. In jest, Aslan replied, "No, little friend. You have not made the first joke. You have only been the first joke." Thus, the jackdaw became the first joke.”

We are not laughing with Balaam, we are laughing at him.

The seer can’t see, oh the dishonor of a female donkey having more spiritual eyes. Balaam, facing death, is protected by a creature who sees so he would hear...

**Numbers 22:34–35** “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.” [35] And the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, “Go with the men, but speak only the word that I tell you.” So Balaam went on with the princes of Balak. (ESV)

In going to Moab, he had thought to obey the summons of Balak, but through the incident with the donkey, the Lord confronted him afresh with the reality of whose summons he had to obey. Like a mere donkey, Balaam’s part was not to be creative and pioneer his own path: rather, he was simply required to be an obedient medium for the Lord’s message.

He arrives but the greed won’t be gain. It could have cost him his life.

**Numbers 22:38** “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 must I speak.” (ESV)

### **The Word of the Lord Rules**

The underlying reality through this chapter and the next two is that nothing defeats the word of the lord who has declared Israel blessed.

This memorable incident with Balaam’s donkey serves to display God’s sovereign ability to bless his people. If he can speak common sense through a donkey, how much more can he speak a word of blessing through this pagan prophet Balaam!

His word will stand. Israel is only blessed because Yahweh has declared it.

For us, his word is Jesus.

**2 Corinthians 1:20** “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. (ESV)

- The promise of rest for the weary.
- The promise of salvation for all who believe.
- The promise that we will not walk in darkness but the light of life.
- The promise of the Holy Spirit to dwell in us, teaching us, giving us peace and his power.
- The promise of abiding fruitfulness.

- The promise that he has gone to prepare a place for us.
- The promise of resurrection and eternity with Jesus.

Promises that outpace idolatry and greed. That deliver something better.

We can get stuck in the error of Balaam...“Our actions make plain what else we must have apart from the Lord to make our lives meaningful and significant. It may be money or power or acceptance or comfort or a myriad of other things, but whenever obedience to the Lord’s Word means that our idol is challenged, we find ourselves drawn away from obedience in pursuit of our “what else.” No matter how orthodox and impressive our words are, they are not worth the breath expended in uttering them if there is no congruence between them and our deeds.”

I need to trust in something even better than my repentance... “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...”

The blood of Christ is better.

**Hebrews 9:11–14** “But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) [12] he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. [13] For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, [14] how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” (ESV)

The same God who cares for the birds of the air and lilies of the field, cares oh so much more for you. Greed won’t get us there. But his word will bring us all the way home. What he gives is what you need.

While Christians may be persecuted and reviled by the world, our security and joy comes in knowing that every promise of God has been secured for us by Christ (2 Cor. 1:20; Eph. 1:3)—thus, no powers can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Num. 23:23; Rom. 8:31–39).



**Romans 8:32** “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (ESV)

What do you run to for blessing?

Repent. Run to Jesus and be satisfied.

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Where we picture a lake, it is a field the Lord bring us to. One worth selling everything to gain because he gave everything to gain us.

Root yourselves in his promise, his provision, in him.

That you would see Jesus as you come out of the wilderness.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow  
Praise Him, all creatures here below  
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost