

Lesson 16 (Study Notes): “I Cannot Go Beyond the Word of the Lord”

Class Member Reading: Numbers 22; 23; 24; 25:1-3; 31:1-16

Numbers 22; 23; 24; 25:1-3; 31:1-16

This is entertaining because it is a “I do not think this story means what you think it means” example.

22The Israelites set out, and camped in the plains of Moab across the Jordan from Jericho. ²Now Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. ³Moab was in great dread of the people, because they were so numerous; Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel. ⁴And Moab said to the elders of Midian, ‘This horde will now lick up all that is around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field.’ Now Balak son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time. ⁵**He sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor at Pethor, which is on the Euphrates, in the land of Amaw, to summon him**, saying, ‘A people has come out of Egypt; they have spread over the face of the earth, and they have settled next to me. ⁶Come now, **curse this people for me**, since they are stronger than I; perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land; for I know that whomsoever you bless is blessed, and whomsoever you curse is cursed.’ So, this is a story where a little Biblical knowledge and close reading goes a long way. This is a story about *outsiders*. The Moabites are enemies of the Israelites. Note that Balak calls Balaam at 1-800-Prophets, meaning that he looks him up for a blessing or cursing on demand, which means Balaam is a prophet for hire! (as is made completely explicit in verse 7) As we will discuss, this is a humorous, folktale-type story. Even the outsiders are proving that the Israelites are chosen

of God and that the God of Israel is the true, powerful God.

7 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 Balak's message. ⁸He said to them, 'Stay here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, **just as the LORD speaks to me**'; so the officials of Moab stayed with Balaam. ⁹God came to Balaam and said, 'Who are these men with you?' ¹⁰Balaam said to God, 'King Balak son of Zippor of Moab has sent me this message: ¹¹"A people has come out of Egypt and has spread over the face of the earth; now come, curse them for me; perhaps I shall be able to fight against them and drive them out." ¹²God said to Balaam, 'You shall not go with them; **you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.**' ¹³So Balaam rose in the morning, and said to the officials of Balak, 'Go to your own land, for the LORD has refused to let me go with you.' ¹⁴So the officials of Moab rose and went to Balak, and said, 'Balaam refuses to come with us.' Some enjoyable dramatic irony in the conversation between the *God of Israel* and this foreign, mercenary prophet. The high amount of dialogue contributes to the enjoyment of the story.

15 Once again Balak sent officials, **more numerous and more distinguished** than these. ¹⁶They came to Balaam and said to him, 'Thus says Balak son of Zippor: "Do not let anything hinder you from coming to me; ¹⁷for I will surely do you great honour, and whatever you say to me I will do (**Balak gives Balaam a blank check**); come, curse this people for me." ' ¹⁸But Balaam replied to the servants of Balak, 'Although 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.** ¹⁹You remain here, as the others did, **so that I may learn what more the LORD may say to me.**' ²⁰That night God came to Balaam and said to him, 'If the men have come to summon you, get up and go with them; but **do only what I tell you to do.**' ²¹So Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the officials of Moab.

Balaam, the Donkey, and the Angel

22 God's anger was kindled because he was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the road as his adversary (*interestingly, this is the Hebrew verb with the same root as Satan*). Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. ²³The **donkey saw the angel of the LORD** standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand; so the donkey turned off the road, and went into the field; and Balaam struck the donkey, to turn it back on to the road. ²⁴Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. ²⁵When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it scraped against the wall, and scraped Balaam's foot against the wall; so he struck it again. ²⁶Then the angel of the LORD went ahead, and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. ²⁷When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it lay down under Balaam; and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. ²⁸Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, **'What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?'** ²⁹Balaam said to the donkey, 'Because you have made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!' ³⁰But the donkey said to Balaam, **'Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you in this way?'** And he said, 'No.' (*It is unfortunate that the NRSV changed the "she" to "it". The Hebrew word for the donkey is pronounced like "atone", which specifically means "she donkey" as opposed to the word "chamor" which means male donkey. Also, the verbs are female. So no question. Amazingly, the donkey is speaking in the place of God! There is also much to learn from the donkey, such as how it appeals to the relationship, and stays soft and calm and asks why Balaam is hurting her.*

31 Then the **LORD opened the eyes of Balaam**, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his

hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face. ³²The angel of the LORD said to him, 'Why have you struck your donkey these three times? I have come out as an adversary, because your way is perverse before me. ³³The donkey saw me, and turned away from me these three times. **If it had not turned away from me, surely I would by now have killed you and let it live.'** ³⁴Then Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, 'I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now therefore, if it is displeasing to you, I will return home.'³⁵The angel of the LORD said to Balaam, 'Go with the men; but speak only what I tell you to speak.' So Balaam went on with the officials of Balak. Note how wise and humble Balaam's response is: he immediately admits his fault and asks what he can do to make it right.

³⁶ When Balak heard that Balaam had come, he went out to meet him at Ir-moab, on the boundary formed by the Arnon, at the farthest point of the boundary. ³⁷Balak said to Balaam, 'Did I not send to summon you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honour you?'³⁸Balaam said to Balak, 'I have come to you now, but do I have power to say just anything? **The word God puts in my mouth, that is what I must say.'** ³⁹Then Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-huzoth. ⁴⁰Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and sent them to Balaam and to the officials who were with him.

Balaam's First Oracle

⁴¹ On the next day Balak took Balaam and brought him up to Bamoth-baal; and from there he could see part of the people of

Israel. **23**¹Then Balaam said to Balak, 'Build me seven altars here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me.' (Extravagant, costly divination, like saying "burn up these seven sports cars") ²Balak did as Balaam had said; and Balak and Balaam offered a bull and a ram on each altar. ³Then Balaam said to Balak, 'Stay here beside your burnt-offerings while I go aside. **Perhaps the LORD will come to meet me. Whatever he shows me I will**

tell you.' And he went to a bare height.

4 Then God met Balaam; and Balaam said to him, 'I have arranged the seven altars, and have offered a bull and a ram on each altar.' ⁵The **LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth**, and said, 'Return to Balak, and **this is what you must say.**' ⁶So he returned to Balak, who was standing beside his burnt-offerings with all the officials of Moab. ⁷Then Balaam uttered his oracle, saying:

'Balak has brought me from Aram,
the king of Moab from the eastern mountains:
"Come, curse Jacob for me;
Come, denounce Israel!"

⁸ **How can I curse whom God has not cursed?**

How can I denounce those whom the LORD has not denounced? [Worth discussing. How can we apply this question to ourselves?](#)

⁹ For from the top of the crags I see him,
from the hills I behold him;
Here is a people living alone,
and not reckoning itself among the nations!

¹⁰ Who can count the dust of Jacob,
or number the dust-cloud of Israel?
Let me die the death of the upright,
and let my end be like his!'

11 Then Balak said to Balaam, 'What have you done to me? **I brought you to curse my enemies, but now you have done nothing but bless them.**' ¹²He answered, '**Must I not take care to say what the LORD puts into my mouth?**'

Balaam's Second Oracle

13 So Balak said to him, 'Come with me to another place from which you may see them; you shall see only part of them, and shall not see them all; then curse them for me from there.' ¹⁴So he took him to the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah. He built seven altars, and offered a bull and a ram on each altar. [\(Balak keeps throwing more and more resources into this question, hoping that](#)

he will get the answer he seeks) ¹⁵ Balaam said to Balak, 'Stand here beside your burnt-offerings, while I meet the LORD over there.' ¹⁶ The LORD met Balaam, put a word into his mouth, and said, 'Return to Balak, and this is what you shall say.' ¹⁷ When he came to him, he was standing beside his burnt-offerings with the officials of Moab. Balak said to him, 'What has the LORD said?' ¹⁸ Then Balaam uttered his oracle, saying:

'Rise, Balak, and hear;

listen to me, O son of Zippor:

¹⁹ **God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind.**

Has he promised, and will he not do it?

Has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?

²⁰ See, **I received a command to bless; he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it.**

²¹ He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob; nor has he seen trouble in Israel.

The LORD their God is with them, acclaimed as a king among them.

²² God, who brings them out of Egypt, is like the horns of a wild ox for them.

²³ Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel;

now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, "See what God has done!"

²⁴ Look, a people rising up like a lioness, and rousing itself like a lion!

It does not lie down until it has eaten the prey and drunk the blood of the slain.'

²⁵ Then Balak said to Balaam, 'Do not curse them at all, and do not bless them at all.' ²⁶ But Balaam answered Balak, 'Did I not tell you,

"Whatever the LORD says, that is what I must do"?' This story is quite a powerful illustration of standing your ground and doing what you feel is right despite tremendous pressure and opposition.

²⁷ So Balak said to Balaam, 'Come now, I will take you to another

place; perhaps it will please God that you may curse them for me from there.' (He keeps trying, keeps spending his resources, won't submit to God) ²⁸So Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor, which overlooks the waste-land. ²⁹Balaam said to Balak, 'Build me seven altars here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me.' ³⁰So Balak did as Balaam had said, and offered a bull and a ram on each altar.

Balaam's Third Oracle

24 Now Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, so he **did not go, as at other times, to look for omens**, but set his face towards the wilderness. ²Balaam looked up and saw Israel camping tribe by tribe. Then the spirit of God came upon him, ³and he uttered his oracle, saying:

'The oracle of Balaam son of Beor,

the oracle of the man whose **eye is clear**,

⁴ the oracle of one who **hears the words of God**,

who sees the vision of the Almighty,

who falls down, but with eyes uncovered: **Balaam stops using his "tools of the trade", and acts as an Israelite prophet would.**

⁵ how fair are your tents, O Jacob,
your encampments, O Israel!

⁶ Like palm groves that stretch far away,
like gardens beside a river,

like aloes that the LORD has planted,
like cedar trees beside the waters.

⁷ Water shall flow from his buckets,
and his seed shall have abundant water,
his king shall be higher than Agag,
and his kingdom shall be exalted.

⁸ God, who brings him out of Egypt,
is like the horns of a wild ox for him;
he shall devour the nations that are his foes
and break their bones.

He shall strike with his arrows.

⁹ He crouched, he lay down like a lion,
and like a lioness; who will rouse him up?
Blessed is everyone who blesses you,
and cursed is everyone who curses you.'

10 Then Balak's anger was kindled against Balaam, and he struck his hands together. Balak said to Balaam, 'I summoned you to curse my enemies, but instead you have blessed them these three times. ¹¹Now be off with you! Go home! I said, "I will reward you richly", but **the LORD has denied you any reward.**' (Balak STILL refuses to see what is going on and blames Balaam rather than seeing God's hand. Note how now Balaam is in the role of the donkey and Balak is in the role of Balaam in the earlier story)¹² And Balaam said to Balak, 'Did I not tell your messengers whom you sent to me, ¹³"If Balak should give me his house full of silver and gold, I would not be able to go beyond the word of the LORD, to do either good or bad of my own will; what the LORD says, that is what I will say"? ¹⁴So now, I am going to my people; let me advise you what this people will do to your people in days to come.'

Balaam's Fourth Oracle

15 So he uttered his oracle, saying:
'The oracle of Balaam son of Beor,
the oracle of the man whose eye is clear,
¹⁶ the oracle of one who hears the words of God,
and knows the knowledge of the Most High, (With each oracle Balaam sees more and demonstrates greater spiritual understanding)
who sees the vision of the Almighty,
who falls down, but with his eyes uncovered:
¹⁷ I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near—
a star shall come out of Jacob,
and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel; (Prediction of Davidic dynasty)
it shall crush the borderlands of Moab,

and the territory of all the Shethites.

¹⁸ Edom will become a possession,
Seir a possession of its enemies,
while Israel does valiantly.

¹⁹ One out of Jacob shall rule,
and destroy the survivors of Ir.'

²⁰ Then he looked on Amalek, and uttered his oracle, saying:
'First among the nations was Amalek,
but its end is to perish for ever.'

²¹ Then he looked on the Kenite, and uttered his oracle, saying:
'Enduring is your dwelling-place,
and your nest is set in the rock;

²² yet Kain is destined for burning.
How long shall Asshur take you away captive?'

²³ Again he uttered his oracle, saying:
'Alas, who shall live when God does this?

²⁴ But ships shall come from Kittim
and shall afflict Asshur and Eber;
and he also shall perish for ever.'

²⁵ Then Balaam got up and went back to his place, and Balak also
went his way.

Worship of Baal of Peor

25 While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. ²These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. ³Thus Israel yoked itself to the Baal of Peor, and the LORD's anger was kindled against Israel. **Why are just these verses assigned? Ah, to create a narrative about Balaam.**

Quote from the manual “Although Balaam would not curse Israel directly, he apparently wanted a reward from Balak badly enough that he suggested tempting Israel to sin, causing them to lose God’s protection.”

War against Midian

31The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²‘Avenge the Israelites on the Midianites; afterwards you shall be gathered to your people.’ ³So Moses said to the people, ‘Arm some of your number for the war, so that they may go against Midian, to execute the LORD’s vengeance on Midian. ⁴You shall send a thousand from each of the tribes of Israel to the war.’ ⁵So out of the thousands of Israel, a thousand from each tribe were conscripted, twelve thousand armed for battle. ⁶Moses sent them to the war, a thousand from each tribe, along with Phinehas son of Eleazar the priest, with the vessels of the sanctuary and the trumpets for sounding the alarm in his hand. ⁷They did battle against Midian, as the LORD had commanded Moses, and killed every male. ⁸They killed the kings of Midian: Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian, in addition to others who were slain by them; and they also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword. ⁹The Israelites took the women of Midian and their little ones captive; and they took all their cattle, their flocks, and all their goods as booty. ¹⁰All their towns where they had settled, and all their encampments, they burned, ¹¹but they took all the spoil and all the booty, both people and animals. ¹²Then they brought the captives and the booty and the spoil to Moses, to Eleazar the priest, and to the congregation of the Israelites, at the camp on the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho.

Return from the War

13 Moses, Eleazar the priest, and all the leaders of the congregation went to meet them outside the camp. ¹⁴Moses became angry with the officers of the army, the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, who had come from service in the war. ¹⁵Moses said to them, ‘Have you allowed all the women to

live? ¹⁶These women here, on Balaam's advice, made the Israelites act treacherously against the LORD in the affair of Peor, so that the plague came among the congregation of the LORD.

Additional Reading: [2 Peter 2:15-16](#); [Jude 1:11](#); [Revelation 2:14](#)

[2 Peter 2:15-16](#)

15 Which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam *the son* of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness;

16 But was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man's voice forbad the madness of the prophet.

[Jude 1:11](#)

11 Woe unto them! for they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core.

[Revelation 2:14](#)

14 But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.

Other Reading: