

BALAAM AND BALAK

(Numbers chapters twenty-two through twenty-five)

The Prophet (Numbers 22:1 - 41)

Israel has complained and grumbled since the day Moses returned to Egypt to deliver them. They have challenged his leadership and accused him of attempting a clever genocide against them. They have made idols to worship and rebelled against God's orders to enter the land. God has sent plagues among them, caused the earth to open and swallow some of them. He has sent fiery serpents among them and threatened twice to destroy them and start over with Moses. He has caused them to wander around in the desert until a whole generation of them died. The question forces itself on our attention, "Has God cast away His people?"

After Israel had experienced an even more serious "Kadesh-barnea" in Acts seven, Paul posed the same question. He answered it clearly, forcefully and finally with two words, "Certainly not!" (Rom. 11:1). At this point in Numbers, four chapters are devoted, basically, to answering the same question. God foils the plot of a clever and determined king, and dictates and controls the message of a hireling prophet, to assure all concerned that Israel has not been cast away. They will, at long last, enter the land of promise. In the midst of all their shortcomings He demonstrates that He loves them and holds out a glorious future for them.

Balaam comes on the scene out of total obscurity and holds our attention for three complete chapters and, even though Balaam is not mentioned in chapter twenty five, the events recorded there are linked firmly to his teaching. Who was this man? Was he a mere heathen soothsayer who passed himself off as a prophet of God? Or was he a true prophet who yielded to the temptation to become rich and powerful, and became a hireling prophet?

Some scholars view Balaam as a "pagan prophet" who "specialized in animal divination. He would inspect the liver of a ritually slain animal to ascertain from its shape and markings the will of the gods."¹ There is no mention of "gods," or the livers of ritually slain animals, in the text. This view rests on the occurrence of the words "soothsayer," "diviner," "divination," and "sorcery" which appear in the Scriptures concerning Balaam.

In Numbers 22:7 the delegation sent to obtain the services of Balaam carried "the diviner's fee" in their hands. Whatever Balaam was in reality, these Baal worshippers would think of him as a diviner. In Numbers 23:23 God assures Balak that his plan to curse Israel through divination will not work. When we are told that Balaam "did not go as at other times, to seek to use sorcery" (Num. 24:1) we need to see what he did those "other times." In Numbers 23:3, 4 and again in verses 15, 16, Balaam went to meet the

¹ From a footnote on Num. 22:5 in the New King James Version of Nelson's Study Bible.

Lord, and the Lord spoke to him. There is no indication that he was inspecting livers of sacrificed animals. When the appellation “soothsayer” was applied to him later in the book of Joshua, it was the dark side of his character that was in view, and he was called a soothsayer in derision (Josh. 13:22).

Other scholars take the view that Balaam was a true prophet of God who went astray through his love for money and honor. “The man who lives before us in these chapters has not only a considerable knowledge of, but a very large amount of faith in, the one true God; he walks with God; he sees him that is invisible; the presence of God, and God’s direct concern about his doings are as familiar and unquestioned elements of his everyday life as they were with Abraham’s. ... Men like Balaam, who probably had a hereditary claim to his position as a seer, remained purely monotheistic in creed, and in their hearts called only on the God of all the earth, the God of Abraham and of Nahor, of Melchisedec and of Job, of Laban and of Jacob. If we knew enough of the religious history of that land, it is possible that we might be able to point to a tolerably complete succession of gifted (in many cases divinely-gifted) men, servants and worshippers of the one true God, down to the Magi who first hailed the rising of the bright and morning star.”²

The latter view appears to be far the most likely portrait of Balaam. We will view the text with this assumption in view. As legitimate as his *office* may have been, the evil in his *character* becomes more and more evident as the story progresses. He eventually promoted immorality to gain his objective, became a symbol of evil, is tagged with the sobriquet “soothsayer,” and died at the hands of Israel’s army.

This does not prove that he was not, in the beginning at least, a prophet of God, but it does demonstrate a vital truth stated by Paul in First Timothy. “Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Tim. 6:9, 10). Toward the close of the Old Testament history Micah complained that Jerusalem’s leaders had fallen into the same trap. “Her heads judge for a bribe, Her priests teach for pay, And her prophets divine for money” (Micah 3:11).

A deterioration of principle and practice with regard to truth, similar in some respects to what happened to Balaam, is set before us in Second Timothy. Those who fail to study the word of truth and rightly divide it (2 Tim. 2:15) have a tendency to go astray from the truth (2:18). If they fail to come to repentance, leading to a knowledge of the truth (2:25), they may spend their lives and waste their talents “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (3:7). From there it is but a short step to opposing the truth (3:8). Eventually, for some at least, they end up turning their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths (4:4). This full descent is, fortunately, not often

² The Pulpit Commentary, volume 2, pages 288, 289 of the section on the book of Numbers.

experienced in any one man's life, but it has characterized the history of all too many Christian organizations, denominations and churches.

The motivating forces in this degeneration seem to be: 1. A failure to be a workman approved by God (2 Tim. 2:15). 2. A desire to teach something new and different (2:18). 3. Unwillingness to accept godly and scriptural correction (2:25). 4. A longing to be singled out and admired as a "scholar" (3:7). 5. A willingness to defend false doctrine by actively opposing the truth (3:8). 6. Eventually turning from truth altogether, turning to fables, to tickle the itching ears of those who will tickle their itching palms – giving them what they want to hear instead of what God has said (4:3, 4). Love of self and love of money (3:2) fuel the entire tragic decline.

Paul was careful to avoid this great pitfall in his own ministry. "For we are not, as so many, peddling [offering for sale] the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ" (2 Cor. 2:17). "What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:18). "For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God" (1 Thess. 2:9).

Paul was not against preachers being supported by those to whom they were ministering. "Who ever goes to war at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock? ... If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things? ... Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel." (1 Cor. 9:7, 11, 14). The evil comes about when preaching becomes merely a way to "make a living," or to support a coveted "lifestyle," instead of the selfless outpouring of a deeply burdened heart – trusting God to meet the needs as He sees them. May God grant us grace to follow Paul's example!

The other actor in this drama was Balak, the king of Moab. The Moabites were descendents of Lot, and Moses had been instructed not to bother them. "Then the LORD said to me, 'Do not harass Moab, nor contend with them in battle, for I will not give you any of their land as a possession, because I have given Ar to the descendants of Lot as a possession'" (Deut. 2:9). Balak was either ignorant of this protection God had arranged for them, or he didn't believe God's command would be obeyed. He and his people were terrified, "exceedingly afraid," at the prospect of being attacked by Israel and destroyed (Num. 22:3). The Midianites were drawn into Balak's scheme to defeat Israel when they were told, "This company will lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field" (Num. 22:4). While the Midianites also were related to the Israelites (they were descendents of Abraham and Keturah - Gen. 25:2), there was no instruction from God protecting them, as was the case with Moab.

Balak intended to fight against Israel (num. 22:11) but wanted to be sure God would give him victory in the battle. Later in Israel's history, when Jehoshaphat joined with Ahab to fight the Syrians, he had the same concern. Wisely, he wanted a word from

the Lord about the matter (1 Kings 22:5). However when he received it he foolishly ignored it. He accompanied Ahab in spite of the Lord's warning that the battle would end in defeat, and disaster befell him. Balak was not even as wise as Jehoshaphat. He did not ask for a word from the Lord, he wanted the Lord to hear *his* word, so he could tell *Him* what to do. "Curse this people for me" (Num. 22:6). I fear that we too often, even when our motives are good, fall into this same error to a degree. Prayer time can degenerate into giving God His instructions for the day instead of seeking His plan for our day. In the Philippines a sign often seen on the Jeepneys reads, "God bless our way." How much better if the signs would read, "God, teach us Your way!"

Balak knew of Balaam's good 'batting average' as a prophet. "He whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed" (Num. 22:6). He evidently knew, or thought he knew, Balaam's character also, for he took it for granted that his services were for sale. Upon Balaam's refusal to come he just offered him more riches and greater honor. 'Every man has his price' was his approach to the problem. Sadly he was right, Balaam did have his price.

It is evident that Balaam was not a mere soothsayer, dealing in divination - though, in view of his later actions, he is called that (Josh. 13:22). When he was summoned to curse Israel he did not consult the liver of an animal for guidance, he consulted the Lord (Jehovah) his God (Num. 22:18). God heard his request and gave him a very clear and complete answer. "And God said to Balaam, 'You shall *not* go with them; you shall *not* curse the people, for they are blessed'" (Num. 22:12). His failure to take this as clear and final reminds me of a sign I saw in a private parking lot that was occasionally being invaded by an uncaring public. It read, "Just what is it you do not understand about '*No trespassing*'?"

Balaam initially followed the directions given to him by God, but his own desire in the matter is revealed in the very way he answered Balak's men. "Go back to your land, for the LORD has refused to give me permission to go with you" (Num. 22:13). The implication is that he *wanted* to go but God was denying him the privilege. He left the door open for further negotiations by not telling them *why* he was not allowed to accompany them. He did not tell them that God had said, "You shall not go with them; *you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed*" (Num. 22:12).

Balak sent a larger and more prestigious delegation with the offer of a 'blank check' for his services. "I will certainly honor you greatly, and *I will do whatever you say to me*. Therefore please come, curse this people for me" (Num. 22:17).

Balaam's answer begins with an impressive and laudatory statement. "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the word of the LORD my God, to do less or more" (Num. 22:18). However he had not given up the idea of accepting Balak's offer. He hoped he could talk God into letting him have his own way. The instruction Balaam received is clear. "God came to Balaam at night and said to him, '*If the men come to call you, rise and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you; that you shall do*'" (Num. 22:20). He evidently took this to mean he had

God's permission at last. To grossly paraphrase a line or so from "The Night before Christmas," *Balaam went gleefully off to his bed, while visions of luxury danced through his head.* It appears that he was so eager to receive the riches and honor offered him that he did not wait for the men to call him, but just arose and saddled his donkey for the trip (Num. 22:21).

At this point Balaam chose what we call "the permissive will of God." Anything less than God's best for us falls, to some extent at least, into the category of His permissive will. When we choose God's second best for us it may put us into the wrong company, the wrong places, spiritual compromise and, eventually, may result in chastening.

Why was God so angry with Balaam when it seems He had given reluctant permission for him to go? God looks on the heart, and He knew Balaam's determination to have his own way at last. There would have been no reason for him to go with the men unless he intended to follow Balak's instructions and curse Israel. Surely he did not think that he would be handsomely reimbursed for blessing them! He seems to have been thinking, "If God has given in to me and allowed me to go to Balak, perhaps He will also allow me to curse Israel. After all, He did not say this time, 'You shall not curse the people' as He did last time. He only said, 'The word which I speak to you; that you shall do.'"

The Lord tried to "restrain the madness of the prophet" (2 Pet. 2:16). Balaam's cupidity had blinded him to the evil nature of what he was doing, and to what God was trying to tell him. His donkey had better vision than he did, for it tells us three times that she saw the angel of the Lord, and he did not. God opened the mouth of the donkey and she spoke to Balaam. He was evidently so engrossed in the honors and riches before him, and so angry at the donkey, that it didn't occur to him to marvel that a donkey was speaking with the voice of a man. This was the donkey he had ridden all his life, as the donkey reminded him, but she had never behaved this way before (v. 30). Even so he failed to grasp what God was trying to tell him - that if the donkey is worthy of death because she has disobeyed Balaam, he should, even more, be judged worthy of death since he has disobeyed God.

God gave Balaam this opportunity to judge himself, much as He did later with David. Nathan told David the story of the rich man who had taken his neighbor's lamb, instead of one from his own flock, to feed his visitor. "He deserves to die!" was David's judgment of the case. "You are the man!" was Nathan's reply (2 Sam. 12:1 - 7).

It is amazing how clearly we can see the evil when we think someone else is the culprit! Paul points out how the religious leaders of Israel in his day were experts at seeing the sins of others, but blind to the fact that they were guilty of the same offenses (Rom. 2:18 - 24).

The Lord who had opened the mouth of the donkey now opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord before him with a sword in his hand. "The

Angel of the LORD said to him, ‘Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to stand against you, because your way is perverse before Me. The donkey saw Me and turned aside from Me these three times. If she had not turned aside from Me, surely *I would also have killed you by now, and let her live*’” (Num. 22:32, 33). Both with David and with Balaam God was more gracious in His judgment than they were in theirs. David did not die, and Balaam was not slain with the sword (that came much later as a result of even more grievous sin -- Josh. 13:22).

When Balaam was forced to see that he had been more perverse than his donkey he admitted, “I have sinned.” His confession was shallow, however, for he still did not appreciate the seriousness of his course of action as God saw it. The angel of the Lord declared, “Your way was *perverse* before me.” In reply the best that Balaam could manage was, “*If it is displeasing -.*” The angel described Balaam’s way as “perverse.” Balaam thought of it as merely “displeasing.” Instead of thanking God for sparing his life he merely offered to turn back – if necessary. Mouthing the words, “I have sinned,” is meaningless unless it expresses a broken and contrite heart (Psa. 51:17).

Having impressed the prophet with the seriousness of his disobedience, God warned him again to speak only what He directed - and allowed him to go on his way.

Balak came out to meet Balaam and scolded him for his reticence to come at his beck and call. He replied, in essence, “Well I *did* come! But I cannot do what you want me to do unless God permits it.”

See who thinks himself the “lord” of Balaam now – expecting instant obedience, offering a reward for service! A man cannot serve two masters. Balaam tried! But he ended up completely a servant of Balak and, as a result, died at the hands of Israel (Num. 31:8).

We learn more about both Balaam and Balak as we consider the prophecies detailed in chapters twenty-three and twenty-four.

The Prophecies (Numbers 23:1 -- 24:25)

The first thing Balaam did was to offer seven bulls and seven rams on a high place of Baal. Balak’s first offering of oxen and sheep (Num. 22:40) was evidently a feast of welcome for Balaam, not a sacrifice to the Lord. He began with two serious blunders in judgment. To begin with, he offered the sacrifices in the wrong place. “Balak took Balaam, and brought him up to the high places of Baal; and he saw from there a portion of the people” (Num. 22:41 – NASB).

When Balak led Balaam to the high places, where Baal was worshipped, to make offerings to Jehovah he was leading Balaam into ‘syncretism’ - “The combination or reconciliation of differing beliefs in religion ... or *an attempt to effect such compromise*” (Webster’ New World Dictionary).

Some branches of Christendom, in their missionary work, have adopted heathen gods and practices and ‘Christianized’ them in order more easily to gain a wide following. In so doing they have joined hands with the enemies of God to stand against those who proclaim a pure gospel. This practice is surely a stench in God’s nostrils. Whether Balaam was aware of it or not, one of the very reasons God was sending Israel into the land was to destroy their Baal worship. Yet here Balak was seeking to ‘Baal-ize’ Jehovah to destroy Israel – and Balaam was a part of it all. Syncretism, whether to draw heathenism into Christianity or to link Jehovah with Baal, was no more pleasing to God then than it is today.

In the second place, Balaam overestimated the value, in God’s sight, of the offerings he was bringing to Him. He failed to realize – or recognize – that “to obey is better than sacrifice,” as Samuel told Saul many years later (1 Sam. 15:22). When Balaam was met by God he proudly informed Him, “I have prepared the seven altars, and I have offered on each altar a bull and a ram” (Num. 23:4). God had already indicated He would tell him what to say. The sacrifices were unnecessary and could only serve as bribes attempting to gain God’s approval and assistance in cursing Israel. Balaam could be bought with a price, but he found out he could not bribe God! The twenty-one bulls and twenty-one rams Balaam eventually ended up offering on high places of Baal (Num. 23:4, 14, 29) surely must have been an offense to God, stirring up His anger rather than His sympathy. God totally ignored the offerings and dictated a message that Balaam knew would infuriate Balak and all the princes of Moab.

“And he took up his oracle and said: ‘Balak the king of Moab has brought me from Aram, from the mountains of the east. “Come, curse Jacob for me, and come, denounce Israel!” How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how shall I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced? For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him; There! a people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations. Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number one-fourth of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his!’” (Num. 23:7 – 10)

Balaam first acknowledged that the proposed attack on Israel was coming from Balak, and admitted his complicity in it. Then he accurately described it as an attempt to denounce and curse them. He declared his inability to carry out the plan, as he was but a mouthpiece for God, and God had neither denounced nor cursed them. As Joshua recalled later, God “was not willing to listen to Balaam. So he had to bless [Israel]” (Joshua 24:10).

As he beheld this people he saw that they were not like other nations, and they stood apart from them. When Israel had arrived at Sinai - at the time they had formally become a ‘nation’ - God had said, “If you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5, 6). Looking back on that day, forty years later, Moses reminded them of this. “You are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The LORD

did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (Deut. 7:6 – 8). In spite of Israel’s failures, even their rebellion at Kadesh, God had not changed His mind about them, “For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29).

Israel did not always appreciate the honor, nor accept the responsibility, of being different, “not reckoning [themselves] among the nations.” There came a time when they told Samuel, “No, but we will have a king over us, that we also may be *like* all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles” (1 Sam. 8:19, 20). Under the kings, sadly, they became more and more like the nations. They began worshipping their gods and following their sinful ways. It led eventually to their dispersion among the very Gentiles they had admired and mimicked.

In a day yet future they will again seek conformity to those around them to save themselves from the persecution they have endured. They will say, “We will be like the Gentiles, like the families in other countries, serving wood and stone” (Ezek. 20:32). It will result in “the time of Jacob's trouble” (Jer. 30:7). “In those days there will be tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the creation which God created until this time, nor ever shall be” (Mark 13:19).

Happily, there will yet come a day when they will have Christ as their King, and in that day they will be gloriously set apart from the nations forever. They shall be the head, and not the tail, of the nations (Deut. 28:13). Jerusalem will be a praise in the earth (Isa. 62:7). “The sons of foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you ... For the nation and kingdom which will not serve you shall perish, and those nations shall be utterly ruined” (Isa. 60:10, 12).

We, too, are called upon to live in separation to the Lord as His people. When we want to be like the world around us, for whatever reason, it leads to loss of our joy and our testimony, and to chastening. Paul warns against being *conformed* to this world and urges us to be “*transformed* by the renewing of [our] mind, that [we] may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom. 12:2). This is made possible as God works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13). “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed³ into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18).

In the New Testament - after centuries of rebelliousness and disobedience; after chastenings and dispersions; after Kadesh-barnea and an echo of it in Acts seven – the believing remnant is assured that they are still “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people” (1 Pet. 2:9). Other nations have played their part in

³ The word “transformed” in both Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18 is the word translated “transfigured” in the transfiguration of Christ. It is the Greek word from which we get our English word “metamorphosis.”

history, lost their national identity, and dropped from sight. But Israel is with us to this day, and is still a nation apart. No other people in history have been persecuted and scattered as they have been and retained their national identity as Israel has. Balaam's prophetic "Not reckoning itself among the nations" was not only a statement of the status quo, but also a prophecy of their future, as God had foreseen and determined that future.

Balaam then marveled at the size of their encampment. It was so extensive that he despaired of numbering even the one fourth of them that were visible to him (Num. 22:41) from the high place where he stood. In spite of their cruel slavery in Egypt, the decimating chastenings along the way in the wilderness, and the judgmental death of the entire army that had started out thirty-eight years earlier, they were "as the stars of heaven in multitude" (Deut. 1:10).

Balaam admitted that they were a righteous nation and were destined for an enviable future. He surely had but a faint and incomplete concept the glorious future ahead of Israel, for most of the prophecies concerning the end times had not yet been written. However, even the little God had revealed to him about it was attractive indeed.

How reluctant the prophet must have been to face Balak with such a message. Not only could he almost feel the rewards slipping through his fingers, but the possibility of bitter reprisal must have crossed his mind as well. Nonetheless he delivered it faithfully.

"Then Balak said to Balaam, 'What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and look, you have blessed them bountifully!'" (Num. 23:11). Later Moses recalled this overturning of the intentions of Balaam. "The LORD your God would not listen to Balaam, but the LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the LORD your God loves you" (Deut. 23:5).

Balak understood the message perfectly, but he didn't accept it as final. He evidently thought that if Balaam could not curse the entire multitude he could at least curse the stragglers. "Then Balak said to him, 'Please come with me to another place from which you may see them; you shall see only the outer part of them, and shall not see them all; curse them for me from there'" (Num. 23:13). After seven more rams and seven more bulls had been offered, Balaam met with the Lord again and received further revelation. The second prophecy was addressed specifically to Balak. "Rise up, Balak, and hear! Listen to me, son of Zippor!" (Num. 23:18).

Balak was rebuked for thinking that he could make God change His mind. "God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man,⁴ that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?" (Num. 23:19). Balaam continued, "Behold, I have received a command to bless; He has blessed, and I cannot reverse it [much as he would have liked to]" (Num. 23:20). "Why are you coming

⁴ This passage has been misapplied and used against the deity of Christ. True, God is not a man, but centuries after this He took humanity upon Him and, in a carefully documented and restricted sense, *became* a man at the incarnation.

to Me again? Have I not clearly given you your answer?” is the epitome of God’s reply to Balak.

The next verse is startling in view of Israel’s history of discontent and rebellion over the past forty years! “He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, nor has He seen wickedness in Israel. The LORD his God is with him, and the shout of a King is among them” (Num. 23:21). God is not blind. He was fully aware of the miserable ‘track record’ of His people – and He had chastened them for it. But when the accuser came against them He saw them as under the blood of the Passover lamb and their standing before Him was flawless. Their sins had been covered in God’s sight and, positionally, He did not see iniquity or wickedness in His people.⁵ They are, in God’s sight, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation (Ex. 19:6). It is too bad that Balaam could not have known the truth set forth in later Scripture. “Do not malign a servant to his master, Lest he curse you, and you be found guilty” (Prov. 30:10). “Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand” (Rom. 14:4). We *do* know this truth and are expected to remember it.

There is a notable demonstration of this principle in the life of David. In order to grasp this it is important to realize there is a difference in viewpoint between Samuel and Kings, on the one hand, and First and Second Chronicles on the other. The former books give us the history of both Judah and Israel, while the latter cover part of the history already set forth, but from a different perspective. Chronicles concerns the history of Judah alone (except when the history of Judah touches that of Israel) – and relates it **as God viewed it**. While the former books tell what happened, we often need to consult Chronicles to find out *why* it happened. Sometimes we have additional information in Chronicles, as in the case of Manasseh. Both Second Kings and Second Chronicles relate the terrible wickedness of this king, yet only in Chronicles do we learn that he had a late, but glorious, conversion (2 Chron. 33:12, 13).

In the case of David it is the *omission* of vital information that strikes the eye. Second Samuel gives us the full account of David’s sin with Bathsheba and the tragic consequences of it. In Chronicles, however, his sin is never mentioned, even when the account covers the same time in his history.⁶ Nathan told David that, even though he would not die, there would be chastening to face. “The sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the LORD: ‘Behold, I will raise up adversity against you from your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun’” (2 Sam. 12:10, 11).

This prophecy was fulfilled, and faithfully recorded in Second Samuel. His first son by Bathsheba died; Amnon raped his sister; Absalom killed Amnon, rebelled against

⁵ The NASB translation – “He has not observed *misfortune* in Jacob; nor has He seen *trouble* in Israel” does not fit the context, and loses the teaching of the passage.

⁶ Compare 2 Sam. 11:1; 12:26 – 30 with 1 Chron. 20:1, 2.

his father, fully intending to kill him, and committed adultery openly with his father's concubines.

Not one of these things is even mentioned in Chronicles! Why? It was because Chronicles presents *God's* view of the matter. As He saw it, David's sin was forgiven and *forgotten*. David prayed, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions ... Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities" (Psa. 51:1, 9). God's response could be couched in the same words He used concerning Israel, "I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and *I will not remember* your sins ... I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, and like a cloud, your sins. Return to Me, for I have redeemed you" (Isa. 43:25; 44:22). He was chastened severely, but not condemned. His sin was handled within God's family and he was not 'taken to court.'

When, as a boy, I misbehaved badly my father would sometimes take me to the woodshed where the 'board of education' would be applied to my 'seat of learning' – but he did not send me to jail. As sinful as David's actions had been, God was saying, in effect, (in Chronicles) "I have not observed iniquity in David, nor have I seen wickedness in him." (Compare Numbers 23:21).

We are in a stronger position than either Israel or David enjoyed, for our sins are not merely covered, and forgotten, but taken away. God saw them in light of the Passover Lamb, but He sees us in light of the sacrifice of Christ, the fulfillment of that Passover. Our standing, our position, is perfect and secure, but we need to give attention to our state and condition. Much as we long to bring our condition up to our position, we all fall far short. This not only gives "great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme" (2 Sam. 12:14) but also gives Satan a basis for his accusations before the Lord (Rev. 12:10).

Consideration of the difference between our *position* and our *condition* reminds me of a story. A farm boy was sent out to see how the setting hen was doing. He found her carefully covering her eggs, but when one egg was broken accidentally it proved to be rotten. Assuming that the rest of the eggs were in the same condition, he reported to his father, "Her *position* is fine, but her *condition* is terrible." An old hymn puts it this way:

I hear the accuser roar
 Of ills that I have done.
 I know them well, and thousands more,
 Jehovah findeth none!⁷

God knows about our state, and knows what to do about it, but He never listens to the accuser, nor pronounces a curse upon us. Our spiritual condition, our "state," as believers is a family affair (Heb. 12:5 – 7) and will not be aired in the courtroom (John 5:24; Rom. 8:1).

⁷ The Believers Hymnbook, Pickering and Inglis, hymn number 93.

The very God that Barak was seeking to enlist to curse Israel was already with Jacob, dwelling among Israel as their King. “The LORD his God is with him, and the shout of a King is among them” (Num. 23:21). While the people encamped in the valley were not fully aware of it, He was the One who had brought them out of Egypt and was protecting them as the wild ox is protected by its horns. “God brings them out of Egypt, He is for them like the horns of the wild ox” (Num. 23:22 - NASB).

Years later, when Israel demanded that Samuel should give them a king, they were still unaware they already had a King. During the period of the judges every man did what was right in his own eyes because, as they saw it, “there was no king in Israel” (Judges 17:6; 21:25). Many of the things that were “right” in their own eyes were appalling and disgusting, as the samples of their behavior, given in Judges seventeen through twenty-one, illustrate. Later, when the people demanded a king, God told Samuel, “They have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them” (1 Sam. 8:7).

During this same time period, however, in the village of Bethlehem, there was at least one godly family that knew Israel had a King. This is indicated in the name of Naomi’s husband, Elimelech, which means, “My God is King” (Ruth 1:3). The lovely story told in the book of Ruth demonstrates how the nation could have been enjoying life in their land if they had recognized God as their King and bowed to His beneficent reign.

How much sorrow and frustration we could avoid if we daily recognized Christ’s place as our Lord, the Head of the church which is His body (Col. 1:18), and the Head of every man (1 Cor. 11:3). When we take over the reins, and act as king over our life, we become, to some degree at least, like the world around us. It may save us from the inconvenience and reproach of being “different” but it robs us of the blessing of walking in the Spirit and enjoying the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

“For there is no sorcery against Jacob, nor any divination against Israel. It now must be said of Jacob and of Israel, ‘Oh, what God has done!’ Look, a people rises like a lioness, and lifts itself up like a lion; it shall not lie down until it devours the prey, and drinks the blood of the slain” (Num. 23:23, 24).

Balak, who looked upon Balaam as merely a somewhat different - and more reliable – ‘diviner,’ was told that no omen or divination could hope to succeed against Israel. What God will do in behalf of His people will be a thing at which to marvel. Under His guiding hand, and by His power, they will be as fearful to stand against as a lion killing and eating its prey.

Upon hearing this second prophecy Balak was furious. He seems almost ready to reward Balaam if he will just keep quiet. “Then Balak said to Balaam, ‘Neither curse them at all, nor bless them at all!’” (Num. 23:25). He could have said to Balaam, as Job said to Zophar, “Oh, that you would be silent, and it would be your wisdom!” (Job 13:5).

However He still clung to the hope that Balaam would be able to curse at least a

part of Israel, so he took him to yet another location where they could behold them from a different viewpoint. One is reminded of Satan’s attack against Job. When his first assault failed he did not give up. He just came at him from a new direction. If Job could not be persuaded to curse God and die when his possessions and children were taken from him, perhaps he could be made to do so when his body was subjected to catastrophic illness. Satan doesn’t give up on us either. If he fails in one approach he will try another and yet another. Praise the Lord, He is as faithful in His defense of us as He was on behalf of Israel, and “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

When Balaam attempted the third time to curse Israel he took another giant step downward in his office of prophet. He finally realized that God was not going to curse Israel, so he decided he would not consult Him about it any longer. He determined to substitute his own word for the word of God. “Now when Balaam [finally!] saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he did not go as at other times, to seek to use sorcery, but he set his face toward the wilderness” (Num. 24:1).

The term “use sorcery” is probably descriptive of the thing from Balak’s understanding of what was going on. As noted earlier, if we consider what he had done “at [the] other [two] times” there is no indication that he had used the methods of those who really were sorcerers, drawing information from the livers of animals, etc. Before the first prophecy he had said, “I will go; perhaps the LORD will come to meet me, and whatever He shows me I will tell you.” Then “God met Balaam, and he said to Him, ‘I have prepared the seven altars, and I have offered on each altar a bull and a ram’” (Num. 23:3, 4). Before the second prophecy he told Balak, “Stand here by your burnt offering while I meet the Lord over there.” Then “the LORD met Balaam, and put a word in his mouth, and said, ‘Go back to Balak, and thus you shall speak’” (Num. 23:15, 16). There is no indication of anything but a personal encounter with God in these verses.

When Balaam decided to ‘prophesy’ what *he* wanted to say, the Lord didn’t let him get by with it. “The Spirit of God came upon him” (Num. 24:2). This is the first time the Spirit is mentioned in this story. In other Scripture, when the Holy Spirit came upon anyone exciting things began to happen. Tracing this expression through the Old Testament, it is apparent that God sent His Spirit upon men to enable them to do or say things they could not do, or would not say, on their own. Since God was dealing with a ‘hostile witness’ in the case of Balaam, He evidently put him into a trance so he could not speak for himself. His oracle became “the utterance of him who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, who falls down, with eyes wide open” (Num. 24:4).

In this prophecy God revealed how precious Israel is to Him. “How lovely are your tents, O Jacob! Your dwellings, O Israel! Like valleys that stretch out, like gardens by the riverside, like aloes planted by the LORD, like cedars beside the waters” (Num. 24:5, 6). He shall “pour water from his buckets” (Num. 24:7a). Israel will be a source of blessing to the world, an extension of the promise made to his father, Abraham, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). “His seed shall be in many waters” (Num. 24:7b) probably looks ahead to the prominent place Israel, the “head” of

the nations, will have in the governing of the world, under Christ. Their King and His kingdom shall be exalted above, far above, that of Agag, “His king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted” (Num. 24:7c).

It was God who brought Israel out of Egypt. He gives them strength with which they will be victorious over their enemies, whom they will totally destroy. “God brings him out of Egypt; he has strength like a wild ox; he shall consume the nations, his enemies; he shall break their bones and pierce them with his arrows” (Num. 24:8). They have a lion’s strength – and Balak should hesitate a long time before he attempts to fight them. “He bows down, he lies down as a lion; and as a lion, who shall rouse him?” (Num. 24:9a).

The conclusion to this prophecy is a demonstration of the grace of God. After all Balak and Balaam had tried to do to curse Israel, God offered His gracious solution to their problem. They could, indeed, not only be spared from destruction by Israel, but be blessed through them – IF they would bless Israel instead of seeking to curse them. “*Blessed is he who blesses you, And cursed is he who curses you*” (Num. 24:9b).

History is strewn with the wreckage of nations that did not follow this edict! Our own nation has been greatly blessed in the past when it stood behind Israel and refused to have any part, as a nation, in persecuting the Jews. In contrast, we are in grave danger today of incurring God’s curse as we turn from Israel and, to save our oil supply or pacify other nations, align ourselves with Israel’s enemies.

“Then Balak's anger was aroused against Balaam, and he struck his hands together; and Balak said to Balaam, ‘I called you to curse my enemies, and look, you have bountifully blessed them these three times! Now therefore, flee to your place. I said I would greatly honor you, but in fact, the LORD has kept you back from honor.’ So Balaam said to Balak, ‘Did I not also speak to your messengers whom you sent to me, saying, “If Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the word of the LORD, to do good or bad of my own will. What the LORD says, that I must speak”? And now, indeed, I am going to my people. Come, I will advise you what this people will do to your people in the latter days’” (Num. 24:10 – 14).

Balak refused this opportunity for obtaining blessing (by blessing Israel) and was furious with Balaam for not cursing them. Instead of taking the life of the prophet, as Balaam must have expected when Balak struck his hands together in livid anger, he was told to flee to his place. “The LORD has kept you back from honor” roared Balak. “It’s not my fault” returned Balaam, in effect, “What the LORD says, good or bad, that I must speak” (Num. 24:13).

The Lord was not finished with Balak, however. Balaam, again under constraint from the Lord, (Num. 24:15, 16), had a closing message for Balak and those who were with him, or shared his enmity against God’s people.

This set of prophecies opens with a vision of the King who will lead Israel in defeating all of their enemies. “I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, and destroy all the sons of tumult. And Edom shall be a possession; Seir also, his enemies, shall be a possession, while Israel does valiantly. Out of Jacob One shall have dominion, and destroy the remains of the city” (Num. 24:17 – 19).

The Star out of Jacob, the Scepter arising from Israel, is none other than Christ, of course. He is spoken of as the Star at the beginning of the book of Revelation, and at the end of the book He, Himself, declared, “I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star” (Rev. 2:28; 22:16). While most of the victories foreseen in Balaam’s view of the future have already taken place, the prophecy reaches on to His return in glory and His final victory over Israel’s enemies. It is then that He will take up the scepter and reign “where-ere the sun doth his successive journeys run,” as the hymn writer described it.

Moab is to be judged by God in the then distant future, but Israel, under Moses, did not attack them as they did Midian.⁸ Several considerations may be cited to account for this delay of their doom. First of all they were descendents of Abraham’s nephew, Lot, and God had instructed Moses, “Do not harass Moab, nor contend with them in battle” (Deut. 2:9). Also it appears that it was not the Moabites, but the Midianites, who had taken the leading role in seducing the Israelites to idolatry and immorality. “Look, these [Midianite] women caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD” (Num. 31:16). The Lord did put a wall of separation to isolate Israel from Moab however. “An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the LORD forever”⁹ (Deut. 23:3).

Later Moab was often in conflict with Israel, but there came a time when a godly family found refuge in Moab during a famine (Ruth 1:1). The Moabitess, Ruth, came to Israel, having embraced Israel’s God (and became an ancestor of Christ - Ruth 1:16; Matt. 1:5). Still later David, the great grandson of Ruth, went to Moab to arrange for a safe refuge for his parents while Saul was seeking his life (1 Sam. 22: 3, 4).

After David became king, however, he did engage Moab in battle – and was victorious over them. He slew many of them and made servants of the rest (2 Sam. 8:2,

⁸ When Judah was later invaded by Moab, Jehoshaphat, Judah’s king at the time, called upon the Lord. “And now, here are the people of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir; whom You would not let Israel invade when they came out of the land of Egypt, but they turned from them and did not destroy them; here they are, rewarding us by coming to throw us out of Your possession which You have given us to inherit. O our God, will You not judge them? For we have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are upon You” (2 Chron. 20:10 – 12).

⁹ Although David, and Christ as well, were descendents of a Moabitess this ruling does not apply to them for descent was reckoned through the father, not the mother.

3). Solomon, as part of a plan for peace with his neighbors, married some women of Moab - and they led him into idolatry (1 Kings 11:1, 7). In the days of Elisha, Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, and Jehoram, king of Israel, were victorious in a battle with Moab (2 Chron. 3:5 – 24).

There will come a time, still future, when Moab will be called upon to be a source of refuge for the Jews during the Tribulation. “Let My outcasts dwell with you, O Moab; be a shelter to them from the face of the spoiler” (Isa. 16:4). Sadly, it appears they will not respond to the call for help for, later in this same chapter, it says they will be judged severely. “For on this mountain the hand of the LORD will rest, and Moab shall be trampled down under Him, as straw is trampled down for the refuse heap. And He will spread out His hands in their midst as a swimmer reaches out to swim, and He will bring down their pride together with the trickery of their hands. The fortress of the high fort of your walls He will bring down, lay low, and bring to the ground, down to the dust” (Isa. 16:10 – 12). It will be then that the Scepter shall come forth from Israel and crush the forehead of Moab and the crown of the head of tumult (Num. 24:17 – NASB margin).

Edom comes next in the prophecy. They refused the request of Moses for safe passage through their territory even though, being descendents of Esau, the Israelites were their relatives. Moses did not fight with them. Instead he led the host around them in peace. There will come a day, however, when the land through which they would not allow their brethren to pass will be possessed by others, probably by Israel. Seir will share the same fate. “Edom shall be a possession; Seir also, his [Christ’s? - or Israel’s?] enemies, shall be a possession, while Israel does valiantly” (Num. 24:18).

The remaining three prophecies are set off, as the others are, by the statement “he took up his oracle and said” (Num. 24:20, 21, 23).

The Amalekites were the first people to fight against Israel after their escape from Pharaoh’s army. It appears that Amalek typifies the flesh. They were descendents of Esau, whose interests were fleshly in contrast to those of Jacob. He is described as a “profane” (NKJV) or “godless” (NASB) person who “sold his own birthright for a single meal” (Heb. 12:6 – NASB). The first, fiercest, and most persistent enemy of the believer today, when he has been delivered from Satan’s power, is his fleshly nature.

We gain a picture of our battle with the flesh, and God’s victory in it, as we ponder the seventeenth chapter of Exodus (Ex. 17:8 – 16). Christ is typified twice in this narrative. The name “Joshua” is the Old Testament form of the name “Jesus.” In Hebrews 4:8 the KJV reads, “if *Jesus* had given them rest,” when it is the Old Testament *Joshua* who is in view. Joshua (“*Jesus*”) was leading the army into battle, he was their “head” (compare Eph. 1:22, 23). The people were fighting with whatever they had at the time as armor and weaponry (compare Eph. 6:13 – 17). The only weapon specifically mentioned is the “edge of the sword” (compare Ex. 17:13 with Eph. 6:17).

However the outcome of the battle was dependent on something else as well. On the top of a hill Moses stood, lifting his hands in a physical attitude of prayer, with the

rod of God in his hand. Just as Joshua foreshadows Christ as our Captain (compare Heb. 2:11), so Moses, on the top of the hill above the fray, typifies Christ as the One who makes intercession for us, enabling Him to save us to the uttermost (Heb. 7:25; Rom. 8:34). Praise the Lord, His hands never grow weary, as did those of Moses!

At the close of the battle in Exodus the Amalekites were defeated and God said, “I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. ... Because the LORD has sworn: the LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation” (Ex. 17:14, 16). Later, when Gideon became a judge over Israel, his battle was against the Amalekites as well as the Midianites (Judges 6:7, 12). Later still, this war against Amalek was entrusted to king Saul. “Samuel also said to Saul, ‘The LORD sent me to anoint you king over His people, over Israel. Now therefore, heed the voice of the words of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: “I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he ambushed him on the way when he came up from Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey”’” (1 Sam. 15:1 – 3).

Instead of obeying God, Saul spared “the best of the sheep and the oxen,” and also allowed their king to live (1 Sam. 15:15, 20). He did not realize that there was nothing good in Amalek. As we face the conflict with the flesh – our ‘Amalek’ – we must remember what Paul learned in Romans 7:18. “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) *nothing good* dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.” God had no plan for Amalek but their complete destruction. He has, likewise, no plan for our flesh but death. He does not seek to improve it, restrain it, or save what is ‘good’ out of it. Our fleshly nature is totally evil and He plans only death for it. As a matter of fact, it has already been slain, positionally, at the cross (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20). It will one day be totally and finally put away when we are with Him and like Him, and it is even now to be accounted dead as we walk before Him day by day (Rom. 6:11). Any attempt on our part to tame the flesh, improve the flesh, or bring it under our control is doomed to failure. Victory comes only when we account it dead and walk in the Spirit.

The pronouncement against Amalek probably seemed too drastic and heartless to King Saul, but God knew what the Amalekites would seek to do to Israel in the future. Saul told Samuel, “I have obeyed the voice of the LORD, ... I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites” (1 Sam. 15:20). He must have missed some of them, however, for a band of Amalekites destroyed David’s city of Ziklag (1 Sam. 30:1) and it was, almost fittingly, an Amalekite who claimed to have killed King Saul (2 Sam. 1:6 – 10).

Another surviving Amalekite, much later, came very close indeed to totally destroying the entire nation. Remember the king that Saul had spared - Agag? In the book of Esther an “Agagite” (Esther 3:1) planned a genocide against Israel and – but for the hand of God, operating through Mordecai and Esther – could have succeeded. Haman, the Agagite, was slain on the very “tree” planned for Mordecai (Esther 7:10. “Gallows” here is literally “tree” according to the NASB margin). So our flesh finds its

death - positional, experimental, and final - at the “tree” where our heavenly Mordecai truly did die. “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’)” (Gal. 3:13). “Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness; by whose stripes you were healed” (1 Pet. 2:24).

The “Kenites” were Midianites, for Moses’ father-in-law is called a Midianite in Numbers 10:29 and a Kenite in Judges 1:16. Though they judge themselves to be secure they will be consumed. “Then he looked on the Kenites, and he took up his oracle and said: ‘Firm is your dwelling place, and your nest is set in the rock; nevertheless Kain shall be burned. How long until Asshur carries you away captive?’” (Num. 24:21, 22). The King James Version translates the last part of this verse, “Nevertheless the Kenite shall be wasted, until Asshur shall carry thee away captive.”

Commenting on verse twenty-two the Pulpit Commentary states, “Probably ‘Kain’ stands for the tribe-father and is simply the poetical equivalent of Kenite.”¹⁰ With this in view the King James Version seems to be the better translation. “Asshur” refers to Assyria, and the prophecy sees the Kenites taken captive by that empire.

Early in their history the land of the Kenites was promised to the descendents of Abraham (Gen. 15:18 – 20). During the period of the Judges at least one Kenite was a help to Israel. Heber, whose wife, Jael, killed Sisera, the General of Jabin’s army, was a Kenite, a descendent of the father-in-law of Moses (Judges 4:11, 17).¹¹ It seems that Heber - probably at Deborah’s instigation - had separated from the other Kenites and become friendly with Jabin in order to act as a spy and lure Sisera to come against Deborah and Barak (Judges 4:11,12). When utterly defeated by Israel Sisera fled on foot to the tent of Heber. The reception extended to him by Jael indicates that Heber’s heart and loyalty was not truly with Jabin. Sisera expected to be protected, but instead he was assassinated (Judges 4:17 – 21).

“And he took up his discourse and said, ‘Alas, who can live except God has ordained it? But ships shall come from the coast of Kittim, And they shall afflict Asshur and shall afflict Eber; So they also shall come to destruction’” (Num. 24:23, 24 – NASB).

“Kittim” seems to refer to the island of Cyprus. The invasion in view is, in contrast to those preceding it, to come from the west. Whoever these conquering invaders are, they shall also be destroyed. Kingdoms and empires come and go, but they will all ultimately be put down by the Star out of Jacob, the Scepter from Israel. God will be the final judge of the nations (Matt. 25:31, 32). Only those ordained by Him, those who at that time are kind to the Jews (Matt. 25:33 – 40), will live to go into the kingdom where Christ will be the Scepter.

“So Balaam rose and departed and returned to his place; Balak also went his way” (Num. 24:25). If “his place” refers to his home he must have taken time first to teach

¹⁰ The Pulpit Commentary, vol. 2, page 318 in the section on Numbers.

¹¹ See my footnote on the study of Num. 10:29.

Balak how to bring God's judgment on Israel. It was soon after the close of the attempts to curse Israel that the women of Midian put his promotion of idolatry and immorality into practice. He must also have returned, almost immediately, to oversee the implementation of his plan, and claim the rewards, for it was in Midian, only a brief time later, that he met his death.

It is instructive to notice that these prophecies shift from the frustrated attempt to curse Israel, through details of Israel's blessing, to a consideration of God's curse upon Israel's enemies. Beginning with Balak's plot, and Balaam's determination to implement it, the passage closes with Balak utterly defeated and Balaam an unwilling but helpless accomplice in carrying out God's purpose in the encounter.

New Testament Scripture takes note of three steps Balaam took downward into infamy. "They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the *way* of Balaam the son of Beor, *who loved the wages of unrighteousness*; but he was rebuked for his iniquity: a dumb donkey speaking with a man's voice restrained the madness of the prophet" (2 Pet. 2:15). "The *way* of Balaam" was to love the wages of unrighteousness. This way is characterized as madness and God used a Donkey to rebuke him, and seek to restrain him. It is interesting that Balaam was so outstanding in his field that Balak was willing to pay a high price for his services, but when God wanted to speak to this highly respected man He used a donkey to do it!

How much better is a donkey with God's message than a Balaam with his own! God enjoys using the foolish things to confound the wise (1 Cor. 1:17). There is a necessary and honored place for theology and godly theologians. However the spiritual babe, with his simple testimony for Christ, is a standing rebuke to many highly educated, but unbelieving and satanically inspired, "theologians" (1Tim. 4:1), who are ever learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth (2Tim. 3:7).

The "*error* of Balaam" was thinking he could either get God to change His mind, or that he could substitute his word for the word of God. In this he was frustrated and defeated. "Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, *have run greedily in the error of Balaam* for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah" (Jude11). This was the classic error of false prophets all through the Old Testament history.

Paul rejoiced that the Thessalonians knew he had not followed this path in his ministry. "For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe" (1 Thess. 2:13). His final message to those of us who live in the last days warns us to beware of Balaam's error. In a day when 'Christians' will be going astray from the truth (2 Tim. 2:16); opposing the truth (2 Tim. 3:8); and turning their ears away from the truth (2 Tim. 4:4) we are, very solemnly indeed (2 Tim. 4:1), warned to "*preach the word!*" (2 Tim. 4:2).

The final tragic step Balaam took into infamy is addressed in Revelation 2:14. “But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the *doctrine* of Balaam, *who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.*”

It is not a coincidence that in our day we are seeing men and churches that have adopted the *way* of Balaam, and rushed headlong into the *error* of Balaam, going ever deeper into his *teaching*. Moral standards have fallen to a level that allows some churches to be dedicated to, and pastored by, homosexuals. The lust for wealth and prestige, the overmastering obsession with amusements of all kinds by both churches and individuals, and the growing exaltation of experience and feelings over Scripture, are as truly idolatry as bowing the knee to Baal. “Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5). While Balaam was rebuked for his “way,” and frustrated in his “error,” he was *executed* for his *teaching*!

Balaam returned to *his place*. An even greater enemy to Israel in the New Testament is said to have gone to “his place.” “Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place” (Acts 1:25). Before Balaam went to his place he taught Balak how to win a victory over Israel without placing a curse on them. Judas, before going to his place betrayed Christ. Both of them paid for their perfidy with their lives: Balaam was executed and Judas committed suicide. “His place” for Balaam was his home in Pethor: “his place” for Judas was, evidently, hell, which is spoken of as “his *own* place.”

The Sequel (Numbers 25:1 - 18)

From Israel’s position, their ‘standing,’ we turn, in chapter twenty-five, to their condition, their ‘state.’ Their standing before God, as His redeemed nation, was flawless, but their state before men, as individuals, rapidly deteriorated. While Balaam’s prophecies had delineated their glorious future, his teaching trapped them into a disgraceful present and doomed them to judgment.¹² God defended them against the curse Balaam longed to place upon them, but chastened them severely when they fell victim to his teaching.

“Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods” (Num. 25:1, 2). While the Moabite women are the ones mentioned in these verses, the single example given here of immorality involved a Midianitish woman (v. 6 and following). Several considerations suggest that while the women of Moab invited the men to both idolatry and harlotry, it was the women of Midian who were the chief offenders in leading the men into immorality.

¹² Even after their idolatry and immorality had been judged the temptation to both remained with them. After they had been in the land for some time one of their leaders spoke about the “The iniquity of Peor ... from which we are not cleansed until this day, although there was a plague in the congregation of the LORD” (Joshua 22:17). Weeds pulled up still leave their seeds behind!

We are told in revelation 2:14 that Balaam kept teaching Balak, the king of Moab, to commit acts of immorality. However in this twenty-fifth chapter of Numbers it is a woman of Midian who is the prime example of this (Num. 25:6). After severely chastening His people for their sin he turned His attention to those who had lured them into it. “Harass the Midianites, and attack them; for they harassed you with their schemes by which they seduced you in the matter of Peor and in the matter of Cozbi, the daughter of a leader of Midian, their sister, who was killed in the day of the plague because of Peor” (Num. 25:17, 18). There is no such instruction concerning the Moabites.

When the time came for this retaliation to be carried out God told Moses, “Take vengeance on the Midianites for the children of Israel. Afterward you shall be gathered to your people” (Num. 31:2). The Midianites are mentioned by name six times in the first nine verses of Numbers thirty-one, but there is no mention of Moab in the entire chapter. It specifically says of the women of *Midian*, “Look, these women caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD” (Num. 31:16). Balaam taught Balak to have the women not only lead the men of Israel into idolatry but also into immorality. Yet, evidently, it was the women of Midian who were chiefly involved in this seduction – and they paid for it with their lives! (Num. 31:17).

Before the “plague” upon the men of Israel was stopped by the heroic action of Phinehas it had taken the lives of 24,000 men.¹³ This plague was very selective. All, and only, those men who were guilty died as a result of it.¹⁴ Moses pointed this out later. “Your eyes have seen what the LORD did at Baal Peor; for the LORD your God has destroyed from among you *all* the men who followed Baal of Peor. But you who held fast to the LORD your God are alive today, *every one of you*.” (Deut. 4:3, 4). At long last, with the death of these men, all of the ‘rebel generation’ was dead. Only Joshua and Caleb, out of all those listed at the beginning of their march to Kadesh-barnea, remained alive. Now a count could be made of those who would actually enter the land – and this is recorded in the next chapter.

¹³ First Corinthians 10:8 gives the number as 23,000. Evidently the *total* number of those who died was 24,000, but 23,000 of them died *in one day*.

¹⁴ This is a most wonderful demonstration of the relationship between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. Phinehas acted on his own initiative, but God so guided him in his decision and action that it corresponded exactly with the time God was ready to end the plague.