

Ministry of Grace Church

Numbers Chapter 22 – Speaker Notes

To fully understand this section of Scripture, we need to pay particular attention to a couple of Hebrew words, specifically the words **LORD** and **God**. Whenever we see the words, “**LORD**” or “**GOD**,” (all caps) we need to recognize that this is the personal name of our God (*Yahweh*). It is the name that is used of Him when it is talking about a personal relationship between Him and one of Adam’s race. The second word we need to recognize is “**God**,” (Hebrew, *Elohim*) which refers to “the powerful one.” *Elohim* is actually the plural form (three or more) of *el*. The word *el* is sometimes translated as god (lower case) and is used in reference to false gods and occasionally it is used of man. The plural form, *Elohim*, is frequently used as a reference to our three-in-one God as the creator of heaven and earth. Reading through this chapter carefully will reveal that Balaam continually makes reference to “**LORD**” (*Yahweh*) but it is only our creator God (*Elohim*) who talks to him. This is a subtle indication that Balaam is not a child of *Yahweh* although, when it suits his needs, he implies that he is.

Numbers 22:1

Then the people of Israel set out and camped in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan at Jericho.

The area where the Israelites camped is to the east of the Jordan River just north of the northern edge of the Dead Sea. This is a gently sloping area that provides a view to the west where Jericho is situated. This area apparently belonged to Moab before Sihon took part of their land away, hence it is referred to as the plains of Moab.

Numbers 22:2-4a

And Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. And Moab was in great dread of the people, because they were many. Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel. And Moab said to the elders of Midian, “This horde will now lick up all that is around us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field.”

Who was this “Balak” person? There is some speculation that Balak was actually a Midianite who had become king of the Moabites. Verse four implies that the Moabites spoke to the elders of Midian as if the Midianites were in power. Also, Zippor (meaning “bird”) is similar in character to other Midianite names such as Oreb (meaning “crow”) and Zeeb (meaning “wolf”). It is possible that the Midianite leaders had taken advantage of the Moabites and moved into power after they were defeated by Sihon.

Perhaps Balak and his people were hoping that Sihon would annihilate the Israelites. However, after the Israelites defeated Sihon and Og the two kings of the Amorites, Balak and the Moabites became terrified of the children of Israel. If you recall, after the Israelites crossed over the Red Sea, they sang a song which talked about the fear of the Canaanites, including Moab:

Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed; trembling seizes the leaders of Moab; all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away. Terror and dread fall upon them; because of the greatness of your arm, they are still as a stone, till your people, O LORD, pass by, till the people pass by whom you have purchased. (*Exodus 15:15-16*)

Now, who were these Midianites that are referred to in our text. The Midianites were generally a nomadic people who carried on trade with people throughout the region from Egypt to Mesopotamia. It is likely that the Midianites were familiar with Balaam as a result of their travels. From our previous

studies we learned that Moses' father-in-law, Reuel, was a Midianite priest ([Exodus 2:15-16, 21](#)). From these passages it appears that there were some Midianites who settled down and others who were nomadic.

Numbers 22:4b-7

So Balak the son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor at Pethor, which is near the River in the land of the people of Amaw, to call him, saying, "Behold, a people has come out of Egypt. They cover the face of the earth, and they are dwelling opposite me. 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." 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.

Balak, the king of Moab, though a descendent of Lot, was not a believer in *Yahweh*. So, because he feared what the Israelites might do to him, he sought out the assistance of Balaam for the purpose of cursing Israel. The intent of Balak was to destroy the Israelites rather than to live peaceably with them.

Throughout the centuries there has been debate as to whether Balaam was a true prophet of *Yahweh* or a false prophet. Books have been written on the subject and great theological minds have concluded both sides of this argument with equal conviction and "proof." Balaam had a reputation of being able to call down blessings and curses on people. This does not mean that he was a prophet of God. It is more likely that his craft was demon enabled. In [Joshua 13:22](#) he is referred to as *qasam*, which means "one who practices divination, a soothsayer" and he was killed by the occupying Israelites as such.

Also, in [Numbers 24:1](#) it is clear that Balaam used sorcery. From these verses alone, it seems clear that Balaam was not a true prophet of God but a sorcerer and a soothsayer. The greater question is whether Balaam was a true believer in *Yahweh* or a heathen who was aware of *Yahweh* and used by *Yahweh*, but not a child of *Yahweh*. The Apostle Peter, in his second letter, talks about false prophets of the Old Testament and false teachers of the New Testament. In speaking of these false teachers, he says:

Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing, but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness. ([2 Peter 2:15-16](#))

Peter refers to Balaam here as a "prophet." But keep in mind that in this section of his letter he is talking about "false prophets."

Numbers 22:8-13

And he said to them, "Lodge here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, as the LORD speaks to me." So the princes of Moab stayed with Balaam. And God came to Balaam and said, "Who are these men with you?" And Balaam said to God, "Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent to me, saying, 'Behold, a people has come out of Egypt, and it covers the face of the earth. Now come, curse them for me. Perhaps I shall be able to fight against them and drive them out.'" God said to Balaam, "You shall not go with them. You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed." So Balaam rose in the morning and said to the princes of Balak, "Go to your own land, for the LORD has refused to let me go with you."

Notice that the text says, "God came to Balaam." Looking carefully, we see that it was not "the LORD" (*Yahweh*,) but "God" (*Elohim*,) who communicated with Balaam. If Balaam knew that it was the Israelites whom Balak was afraid of, and if Balaam had been a prophet of *Yahweh* he surely would have known, then he would not have even entertained the notion of satisfying the request of the emissaries of Balak. Instead, he invited them to lodge for the night so that he might receive word from *Yahweh*.

This appears to be an example of someone who knew of *Yahweh* and may have even believed in the stories told about Him. The events of this chapter occurred around 850 years after the flood, so a general belief in *Yahweh* may still have been widespread among mankind, especially in the area of Northwest Mesopotamia where Abraham's ancestors had lived. It is less likely that Balaam had a personal relationship with *Yahweh* as seen from the evidence presented so far. You may say, "But God spoke to him in a dream." It is not unheard of for God to speak to a heathen via dreams. We have a couple of other examples of this in **Genesis 20:3** (He spoke to Abimelech in a dream) and **Genesis 31:24** (He spoke to Laban the Aramean in a dream.)

God's specific message to Balaam was two-fold: he was not to go with the men that Balak had sent to him, and he was not to curse the Israelites because they are a blessed nation. When God first called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans some four hundred years earlier, he made a promise to Abraham that anyone who cursed him would himself be cursed (see **Genesis 12:1-3**.)

Sounding very pious and "professional," Balaam relayed to the ambassadors only what he wanted them to hear. Not only was he not to return with them, he was not to curse the people at all, but he didn't relay the entire message of God to the princes of Moab. It appears from this that Balaam was willing to curse the people (after all, there was money to be gained from this) and he may have been hoping that God would change his mind.

Numbers 22:14-21

So the princes of Moab rose and went to Balak and said, "Balaam refuses to come with us." Once again Balak sent princes, more in number and more honorable than these. And they came to Balaam and said to him, "Thus says Balak the son of Zippor: 'Let nothing hinder you from coming to me, for I will surely do you great honor, and whatever you say to me I will do. Come, curse this people for me.'" But Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, "Though 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. So you, too, please stay here tonight, that I may know what more the LORD will say to me." And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If the men have come to call you, rise, go with them; but only do what I tell you." So Balaam rose in the morning and saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab.

When the princes of Moab reported back to Balak they only gave him half the message. They neglected to mention the fact that *Yahweh* would not allow Balaam to come at this time. They made it sound like Balaam was simply unwilling to come and curse the Israelites. Since Balak had not received the entire message given to Balaam by God, instead of being discouraged, he was encouraged. He may have believed that Balaam was simply negotiating for more pay for his service.

So, Balak tried to persuade Balaam with a better offer. He said, "I will surely do you great honor, and whatever you say to me I will do." The enticement now included more than just money. It also included the promise of fame and power.

Balaam responded with, "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the LORD my God" On the surface, we see that Balaam was more concerned with having his own way than being obedient to God. Had he really been a servant of *Yahweh* he would have known that *Yahweh* does not change and that he never would be permitted to curse Israel. Notice, however, even though he claims to not be able to go against the will of *Yahweh*, he will eventually go with the princes under the pretense that he will curse the Israelites. Notice, also, that Balaam continues to invoke the personal name of *Yahweh* (LORD) and yet it is only *Elohim* (God) who communicates with him.

But eventually, *Elohim* tells Balaam to, “rise, go with them.” This seems completely contradictory to what we know about *Yahweh*. It is made even more perplexing when we read verse twenty-two and discover that God became angry with Balaam for going with the princes. It is apparent that Balaam believed that he could somehow earn the riches and honor promised him even though *Elohim* had already told him twice that he could not curse Israel.

Numbers 22:22-23

But God's anger was kindled because he went, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. And the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand. And the donkey turned aside out of the road and went into the field. And Balaam struck the donkey, to turn her into the road.

Then, after *Elohim* tells Balaam to go with the princes of Moab, we read that *Elohim* was angry at Balaam. This can most easily be explained when we recognize that though *Elohim* had given Balaam permission to go, he was not to go with the intent of cursing Israel. However, there is no other reason for Balaam to have gone to Balak. Balaam knew what the mission entailed (cursing Israel) and he knew that God had forbidden it. Therefore, it was not the action of going that caused God’s anger to be aroused, but Balaam’s hope that God would change His mind and allow him to curse Israel. In essence God had told Balaam not to go because it would be a futile trip, but Balaam saw God’s message the way he wanted to see it.

We can learn from this that just because God does not restrain us from engaging in some activity does not mean that it is what He wants us to do. When we pray for guidance from God, we need to discern between what we want and what He wants.

Then we read that “the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as his adversary.” The expression “the Angel of the LORD,” is always used in the Old Testament as a description of Jesus preincarnate. It is not the same as “an angel of the LORD.” This is further verified by the statement made in verse thirty-five by the Angel of the LORD, “go with them; but only do what I tell you.”

Next, we learn of another peculiarity in *Yahweh’s* interaction with mankind. He sometimes withholds from our perception what others clearly see. As with Balaam, it is often when we are acting out of self-will that we fail to see the signs of the error of our way. Balaam’s donkey saw the danger of continuing on the path that Balaam had chosen and turned away to avoid tragedy. Therefore, “Balaam struck the donkey.” The prophet’s actions here were clearly contrary to the will of God. Because he was blinded by sin, his seemingly logical actions were contrary to God’s will.

Numbers 22:24, 25

Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. And when the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pushed against the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall. So he struck her again.

This was now the second time that *Yahweh* became a hindrance to Balaam completing his mission. The first time there was room to turn off the road. This time there were walls on each side so turning to the side was not possible. Therefore, the donkey tried to squeeze past the Angel of the LORD and pushed up against one of the walls. Here we see that Balaam’s obstinate determination resulted in injury to himself, for which he blamed the one who was submitted to God’s will (the donkey). It appears here that the donkey, having turned off of the main road the first time, led him to a path that passed between two vineyards which were surrounded by walls. As a result, there was no place for the donkey to turn.

Numbers 22:26-27

Then 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. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam. And Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff.

The third time that God hindered Balaam's progress He left no alternative for avoiding a confrontation. Even a donkey, the symbol of stubbornness, knows when to quit sooner than we do sometimes. More so, we see that a dumb animal knows better when to fall down in humbleness before the Lord than intelligent humans who are set on having their own way.

And - sometimes it is those who claim to be spiritual giants who inflict the most pain on humble, undeserving, obedient servants.

Numbers 22:28-30

Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" And Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a fool of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you." And the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey, on which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat you this way?" And he said, "No."

This is a beautiful picture of what Paul teaches us in his first letter to the Corinthians:

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; (1 Corinthians 1:27)

Sometimes when we are deaf to the still small voice of God talking to us, He will use the voice on one who we think to be dumb to get His message to us.

There appears to be no surprise on the part of Balaam that he has been spoken to by a dumb donkey. Perhaps in his experiences of divination and soothsaying he had seen other animals empowered by demonic power to put forth human speech. Perhaps he is so angry that his rational mind has been numbed to reality. However, even in the face of the miraculous speech of the donkey, Balaam is so focused on himself that he has no other perception than his own pain.

The donkey's response is even more revealing regarding the blindness of Balaam, "Am I not your donkey?" If he were to consider the fact that his faithful donkey had never done such things in the past, he might have perceived that this was nothing short of God trying to get his attention. But even with the revealing conversation of the animal, Balaam still had his focus on himself.

Numbers 22:31-35

Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. And he bowed down and fell on his face. And the angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse before me. The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live." 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." 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.

How often we think that we are so perceptive when, in actuality, we are dumber than brute beasts. Even in the presence of three actions that were out of character for Balaam's donkey and a verbal conversation with the animal, Balaam still failed to perceive the very presence of God Almighty. And,

even after these miraculous events, Balaam failed to see his own blindness and, in fact, would shortly declare himself to be a seer with his eyes open (see **Numbers 24:3-4**).

Finally, we see the proper response to the presence of *Yahweh*. Once Balaam perceived the presence of the LORD, he fell on his face before him. Notice here that even the unsaved, upon recognizing the presence of *Yahweh* are driven to their knees.

Now we clearly see an indication of a sin-sick heart. Though he confesses his sin of beating his donkey, Balaam still fails to see his sinful self-serving desire to please Balak and receive wealth and power for himself. Balaam offers to return to his home, not because he sees the error of his ways, but because the Angel of the LORD is blocking his path to Balak.

Yahweh now once again tells Balaam to go with the princes of Moab, but He reminds Balaam that he will only be able to speak the words that God gives him. Notice that the Angel of the LORD did not say “that you shall be permitted to speak” but “that you shall speak.” The message that *Yahweh* was delivering to Balaam was that *Yahweh* would speak through him and that he would not be able to do otherwise.

Numbers 22:36-41

When Balak heard that Balaam had come, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, on the border formed by the Arnon, at the extremity of the border. And Balak said to Balaam, “Did I not send to you to call you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honor you?” 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.” Then Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-huzoth. And Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and sent for Balaam and for the princes who were with him. And in the morning Balak took Balaam and brought him up to Bamoth-baal, and from there he saw a fraction of the people.

Upon meeting Balaam, Balak immediately proceeded to chastise him for not coming quickly the first time he was sent for, saying, “Did I not send to you to call you?” But Balaam’s response was, “Behold, I have come to you.” In other words, “Look, quit your bellyaching! I’m here, aren’t I?” Balaam then proceeds to inform Balak that he is under obligation to speak only what God (*Elohim*) puts in his mouth to speak.

So What?

What is the mark of a true believer?

We see that beginning in verse eight of this chapter, Balaam portrays himself as a prophet of *Yahweh*. He even tells the emissaries sent to him that he must first consult with *Yahweh* before answering their request. However, as we study the remainder of this chapter it becomes clear that not only was Balaam not a prophet of *Yahweh*, he was not even a true believer of *Yahweh*. How many Christians there are, populating churches all around us, who claim to be the children of God. They pray to Him, they sing songs to Him, they give their money to Him, yet they have no personal relationship with Him. They know about God (*Elohim*) but they do not know the LORD (*Yahweh*). They throw out the name of Jesus, even claiming Him as their Savior, but their actions show that they have no personal commitment to Him and there is no evidence of a relationship with Him.

We can observe Balaam who went through all the motions and making all the proclamations of being a subject of *Yahweh* but his actions were hollow, because they were based on his own will, not that of *Yahweh*. To the casual observer he was a prophet of *Yahweh*. But to those who have a real relationship with the King of Kings, it is clear that Balaam’s religion is only a religion. The sad thing is that those

who today claim to be Christians often know all the right things to say and go through all the prescribed motions believing that they are doing what God wants. But without a personal relationship, one of humble submission to God as their Lord and Master, they have become Christians in name only. They are full of works, but they are lacking in faith. They are often very “religious” and put great effort into giving themselves to the work of the church. When, instead, they should be giving themselves to the Lord of the church, humbly seeking His direction by faith. In his letter to the Romans, Paul points out that it was not Abraham’s works that caused him to be declared as righteous. It was his faith and faith alone.

But wait! We’re commanded not to judge our brothers, aren’t we? What does Paul say in Romans?

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. (Romans 2:1)

In this passage Paul is talking to the self-righteous Jewish Christians who were condemning the Gentile Christians because they did not keep the requirements of the Law of Moses. In the first few chapters of Romans Paul is teaching that we stand righteous before God on the basis of faith, not works. He is cautioning these believers that it is hypocrisy to be judgmental when they were doing the same things:

Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? (Romans 2:3)

So, what about judging others? Certainly, we are not to have a judgmental attitude like those Jewish Christians in Rome did. However, we **are told to judge those who are in the body of Christ**. The fifth chapter of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians deals with this. In it he tells us that we are to judge whether or not our brothers and sisters are living in sin and that we are not to fellowship with them if they are.

But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? **Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?** (1 Corinthians 5:11-12)

Regarding the unsaved, however, in the great commission we are given specific instructions:

And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. (Mark 16:15-16)

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

But we have been given different instructions regarding the body of Christ, the church. Clearly, our responsibility to the body of Christ is to build the church. We are to give of ourselves to one another and we are to submit to one another. We are to have a common fellowship (communion) with one another. But - we are to treat the world differently! We are to be witnesses to the world and to those of the world, but we are not to be part of it or to be partakers with the people of the world.

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

So, how are we to distinguish between people of the world and members of the body of Christ if we don’t make judgments regarding their salvation? Granted, it is difficult to discern between the unsaved

and a true child of God who is living in sin, but we must make that distinction because we are to witness to the unsaved and we are to confront the sin sick Christian.

Conie and I spent six years living in rural New York state where there was no church around that held the same doctrinal beliefs as we do. As a result, we attended a church of another denomination that believed quite differently from us. At first, I questioned whether any of them were really Christians. But God used that time to show me that even though we couldn't agree on some of the lesser doctrines taught in the Bible, we did agree on the basic tenants of the faith. And what I learned through that time is that there were some who exhibited the fruit of the Spirit. There were some who clearly demonstrated that they were part of the body of Christ.

After moving away from that area, we had an opportunity to worship and fellowship with people who held very similar doctrinal beliefs to our own. What I found was that many of them did not exhibit the fruit of the Spirit either. But some clearly did! God used these experiences to show me that a person's spiritual state is not dependent on what church he or she belongs to. It doesn't even depend on whether he or she can cite chapter and verse of doctrinal proof texts. The real evidence is in how they live out their faith.

For, as Paul told Timothy:

But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord **knows** those who are his," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity." (2 Timothy 2:19)

Do you see that? Yahweh knows who the true believers are. He doesn't simply know about us (what actions we are going to perform), He knows us intimately. He knows all about us. For it is one thing to claim to know God, but it is quite another to be known by God! So, what is the mark of a true believer? Jesus said:

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35)

And the Apostle John said a similar thing:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. (1 John 4:7)

And, if a person is genuinely saved, you will know it by their fruit, for Paul said to the Galatians:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23)

We need to discern the spiritual state of others by looking at the fruit, not the tree!

Similarly, we need to make sure that the fruit produced by our lives is good fruit.