

Ministry of Grace Church

Numbers Chapter 23 – Speaker Notes

This chapter is a continuation of the events described in chapter 22. King Balak wanted Balaam to pronounce a curse against Israel because he was afraid of them. This fear was based on the fact that the Israelites were so numerous, and he had heard that they had defeated the Amorites. Balaam, however, was more interested in the money that Balak promised to give him than he was in cursing Israel. So, after first refusing to come and curse Israel, Balaam consented and saddled his donkey to go do Balak's bidding.

Balaam claims to be a prophet of *Yahweh*, but as we have seen, he doesn't really know *Yahweh*. As he was travelling to meet with Balak, *Yahweh* (the Angel of the LORD) stood in his way with his sword drawn. Balaam didn't perceive the presence of *Yahweh*, but his donkey did. When the donkey turned away from the Angel of the LORD, Balaam beat her with his staff. Then, when *Yahweh* opened the eyes of Balaam, He instructed him to go to Balak, but to only say the words that *Yahweh* gave him to say.

Numbers 23:1-3

And Balaam said to Balak, “Build for me here seven altars, and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams.” Balak did as Balaam had said. And Balak and Balaam offered on each altar a bull and a ram. And Balaam said to Balak, “Stand beside your burnt offering, and I will go. Perhaps the LORD will come to meet me, and whatever he shows me I will tell you.” And he went to a bare height,

The first thing to recognize here is that Balaam and Balak are trying to influence God. They expect to do so by offering animal sacrifices. The Israelites also offered animal sacrifices, but they did so in obedience to God's direction and for the purpose of atoning for sins, not for currying favor with God. Balaam and Balak offered these sacrifices neither through faith nor obedience, but as a bribe. What makes this even more unusual is that these sacrifices were ostensibly offered to *Yahweh*, not to the false deity of the Moabites. Actually, Balak may have believed that these altars were being erected in honor of the Baal called Chemosh, the patron deity of Moab. After all, the location that these altars were built was at “Bamoth-Baal” as we see from **Numbers 22:41**:

And in the morning Balak took Balaam and brought him up to Bamoth-baal, and from there he saw a fraction of the people. (Numbers 22:41)

The Hebrew word *bamoth* means “heights of” or “high places of.” It is a reference to being elevated physically as well as spiritually. The word “Baal” means “lord.” It is a generic name for a god of the Canaanites. The Baal of the Moabites was called Chemosh. The worship of Chemosh involved some of the grossest forms of licentiousness.

We get additional information from the first verse of the next chapter indicating that Balaam used sorcery to try to commune with *Yahweh*. The word translated “omens” is *nakhash*, meaning “an incantation or an enchantment.”

When Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he did not go, as at other times, to look for omens, but set his face toward the wilderness. (Numbers 24:1)

Remember that in the past *Yahweh* had spoken to Balaam in dreams while he slept at night. Now he will try to have God speak to him during the daytime. It appears that Balaam used omens or incantations for

the purpose of gaining God's attention. Here again we see Balaam claiming to seek out the word of *Yahweh* but using methods of the black arts which were forbidden in the true worship of *Yahweh*.

False worshipers who think that they are worshipping the true God go through the motions of worship and sacrifice, yet they are without faith. See how man-made religion seeks to influence God to do the will of man. True faith, however, seeks to influence man to do the will of God.

Numbers 23:4-6

and God met Balaam. And Balaam said to him, "I have arranged the seven altars and I have offered on each altar a bull and a ram." And the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth and said, "Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak." And he returned to him, and behold, he and all the princes of Moab were standing beside his burnt offering.

Although it appears that Balaam and Balak had performed actions which caused God (*Elohim*) to come meet, we know that God's will is supreme. It was God's intention to use Balaam to deliver a blessing even though it was Balaam's intention to use *Yahweh* to deliver a curse.

Balaam told *Yahweh*, "I have arranged the seven altars and I have offered ..." See how Balaam approached *Yahweh* with a prideful spirit. It's as if he was saying, "Look what I have done for you!" The careful observer will see that Balak prepared the altars and the sacrifices, but the two of them offered the sacrifices together. Yet, Balaam takes credit for it all. Also, notice how God totally ignores the altars and the sacrifices and He does not respond to Balaam concerning them.

As a result, we see that, "the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth." *Yahweh* did not put the fear of God in Balaam's heart, nor did he put the Spirit of God upon him. He simply impressed on him what he must say about Israel. In the preceding chapter we saw that God dealt harshly with Balaam in order to impress upon him that he must not speak anything about Israel except what *Yahweh* would give him to say.

King Balak and the princes of Moab remained by the sacrifices while Balaam had gone off to receive the message from God. We don't know how long they remained there, but it is interesting to observe the long-suffering that false worshippers will endure in their quest to influence their gods, while we true worshippers of *Yahweh* are so often impatient in receiving a message from the true God.

Numbers 23:7-10

And Balaam took up his discourse and said, "From Aram Balak has brought me, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains: 'Come, curse Jacob for me, and come, denounce Israel!' How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced? For from the top of the crags I see him, from the hills I behold him; behold, a people dwelling alone, and not counting itself among the nations! Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his!"

Balaam said he took up a "discourse." The Hebrew word used here is *mashal*, meaning "a proverb, an oracle, or a parable." This term is never used of the prophecies of the true prophets of *Yahweh*, but only of certain similes or songs contained within the prophecies. This discourse is presented in a poetic form:

From Aram Balak has brought me,

The king of Moab from the eastern mountains.

'Come, curse Jacob for me,

And come, denounce Israel!'

How shall I curse whom God has not cursed?

And how can I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced?

We see here that Balaam came from “Aram,” which means “the highland.” It is a reference to the entire elevated region from the northern frontier of Palestine to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The area between these two great rivers was called Aram-naharaim (Aram of the two rivers). The Greek name for this region is Mesopotamia (*meso* = ”middle” or “between” and *potamos* = “running water, as in a creek, stream, or river”)

Balak wanted Balaam to “curse” the children of Israel. This comes from the Hebrew *qabab*, meaning “a pronouncement of bad fortune or ill favor bestowed on another.” There are at least five other Hebrew verbs with the same general meaning. This verb, in a more specific sense, means to bind (with a spell), to hem in with obstacles, or to render someone powerless to resist.

For from the top of the crags I see him,
From the hills I behold him;
Behold, A people dwelling alone,
And not counting itself among the nations.

Balak told Balaam that he was to curse “A people dwelling alone.” This is not an indication that the Israelites were lonely but that they dwelt separate from the rest of the world. In other words, they are a people whom God has separated from all others as His special people.

There are two reasons that Balaam can’t denounce or curse Israel. The first is the fact that Israel is a people separated by God from all other nations. The second is the fact that they are a people who are richly blessed by God (as evidenced by their great numbers) and highly favored by God (they are declared to be righteous).

Who can count the dust of Jacob,
Or number the fourth part of Israel?
Let me die the death of the upright,
And let my end be like his!

Balaam refers to Israel as “the dust of Jacob.” This may be a direct fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham:

Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth... (Genesis 28:14a)

We should not consider it unusual that this expression is used in Balaam’s oracle since he is speaking the words of *Yahweh* who promised this very thing to Abraham.

It is likely that from his vantage point Balaam could see all four of the quadrants of Israel’s encampment. Their numbers were so great that even the fourth part of Israel is a large number that he was unable to count because of its size.

At the end of his discourse, Balaam proclaimed, “Let me die the death of the upright.” How often we see people who want to die the death of the righteous and be ushered into the presence of a loving God, but they do not want to live the life of the righteous, separated from the world and all its inducements to self and sin.

Numbers 23:11-14

And Balak said to Balaam, “What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have done nothing but bless them.” And he answered and said, “Must I not take care to speak what the LORD puts in my mouth?” And Balak said to him, “Please come with me to another place, from which you may see them. You shall see only a fraction of them and shall not see them all. Then curse them for me from there.” And he took him to the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah, and built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each altar.

Balak's response to Balaam's blessing of Israel was immediate: "What have you done to me?" Balak is not so very different from many people calling themselves Christian today, who call upon the name of the Lord seeking a blessing. However, when God does not respond the way they would like, they become indignant or even angry with Him. Balak continues with, "you have done nothing but bless them." A more literal translation might be: "in blessing you have blessed them." Is this not precisely how *Yahweh* treats those whom He has chosen?

Balaam's response is in defense of God's sovereignty. Though Balaam originally had hoped to be able to persuade *Yahweh* to curse the people as Balak had requested, in the end he realized that *Yahweh* is in control and that he was unable to say anything other than what *Yahweh* specified.

There appears to have been a belief among those who used sorcery that observing the object of their black art was an integral part of their craft. Having not received the curse that he was anticipating, Balak took Balaam to another place to view the children of Israel from another perspective.

Numbers 23:14-17

And he took him to the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah, and built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each altar. Balaam said to Balak, "Stand here beside your burnt offering, while I meet the LORD over there." And the LORD met Balaam and put a word in his mouth and said, "Return to Balak, and thus shall you speak." And he came to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering, and the princes of Moab with him. And Balak said to him, "What has the LORD spoken?"

Balak took Balaam to "Zophim." This Hebrew word means "watchers." Apparently, this was the name for the area on top of Pisgah from which a lookout could see the valley below. Pisgah is the mountain from which Moses surveyed the entire land of Israel's inheritance just before his death:

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho. And the LORD showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, (*Deuteronomy 34:1*)

In response to Balaam's prophecy, Balak said, "What has the LORD spoken?" The mere fact that Balak asks this question indicates that he still had an expectation that Balaam might curse Israel.

Numbers 23:18-24

And Balaam took up his discourse and said, "Rise, Balak, and hear; give ear to me, O son of Zippor: God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? Behold, I received a command to bless: he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it. He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob, nor has he seen trouble in Israel. The LORD their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them. God brings them out of Egypt and is for them like the horns of the wild ox. For there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel; now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, 'What has God wrought!' Behold, a people! As a lioness it rises up and as a lion it lifts itself; it does not lie down until it has devoured the prey and drunk the blood of the slain."

Once again, we see this oracle in a poetic form arranged in a series of stanzas.

Rise, Balak, and hear!
give ear to me, O son of Zippor!

Since Balak had specifically asked what *Yahweh* had spoken, this message was delivered directly to him. "Rise" is not a command to stand since he was already standing by his offering. It is, instead, a command for him to be alert and aware of what was about to be said. For emphasis and effect this is

repeated as Balak is commanded to “hear” and to “Listen to me.” *Yahweh*, through Balaam’s prophecy, is making it very clear to Balak who is supreme and who is in control.

God is not a man, that He should lie,
Or a son of man, that He should change his mind.
Has He said, and will He not do it?
Or has He spoken, and will He not fulfill it?

Balak now receives instruction on the nature of *Yahweh*. He does not lie as a man might do and He does not change his mind. This is prompted by the fact that Balak wanted Balaam to curse Israel even after having heard a blessing proclaimed instead. *Yahweh* now reiterates the fact that He does not change His mind. What He says, He does, and any attempt to make Him change is futile.

Behold, I received a command to bless:
He has blessed, and I cannot revoke it.
He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob,
Nor has He seen trouble in Israel.

Balaam reminds Balak that the original request was to curse Israel, but that *Yahweh* has determined to bless Israel instead and Balaam cannot change that. The expression “He has not observed iniquity in Jacob” does not mean that Israel is without sin. Rather, it is a proclamation that Israel has been “declared” righteous. Because of *Yahweh’s* imputation of righteousness to Israel, He no longer sees any iniquity or wickedness in Israel. Here, also, we see evidence of election and eternal security. The children of Israel were not righteous as a result of their actions but as a result of God’s declaring them so. Couple this with the fact that God does not change and we see that those who are declared righteous by God will always be righteous in his eyes. Balaam continues with:

The LORD their God *is* with them,
And the shout of a king *is* among them.
God brings them out of Egypt
And is for them like the horns of the wild ox.

Balak now hears that *Yahweh* is Israel’s God and they recognize Him as their king. The word “shout” is from the Hebrew word *teruah*, meaning “a shout of joy or a shout of alarm.” The fact that this shout is “the shout of a King” indicates a joyous exclamation, a shout of victory as the king returns from war. *Yahweh* is telling Balak that Israel will be victorious in its conquest of the Promised Land. Next, Balak is informed that it is *Yahweh* who has brought Israel out of Egypt through His great strength. It is *Yahweh* who will give them victory in the future.

For there is no enchantment against Jacob,
No divination against Israel.
Now it shall be said of Jacob
And Israel, What has God wrought!

Balak then heard why it is futile to ask Balaam to curse Israel. Sorcery and divination have no effect against Israel because their God, *Yahweh*, is far too powerful for such things. *Yahweh* is the reason for Israel’s victories, not Israel. He who fights against Israel really fights against *Yahweh*.

Behold, a people! As a lioness it rises up
and as a lion it lifts itself;
it does not lie down until it has devoured the prey
And drunk the blood of the slain.

Some have equated this to a reference to the Lion of Judah, but it is more likely simply a statement that Israel, protected by a strong God, will soon move forward and destroy the inhabitants of the land they are about to enter.

Numbers 23: 25-30

And Balak said to Balaam, “Do not curse them at all, and do not bless them at all.” But Balaam answered Balak, “Did I not tell you, ‘All that the LORD says, that I must do’?” And Balak said to Balaam, “Come now, I will take you to another place. Perhaps it will please God that you may curse them for me from there.” So Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor, which overlooks the desert. And Balaam said to Balak, “Build for me here seven altars and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams.” And Balak did as Balaam had said, and offered a bull and a ram on each altar.

Having now twice expected Balaam to curse Israel, Balak responds with anger after hearing the blessing proclaimed for *Yahweh's* chosen people. Balaam responded by explaining once again that he was restrained from saying anything other than what *Yahweh* gave him to say. However, Balak still believes that he can control *Yahweh* and takes Balaam to a place where he hopes to receive the curse against Israel which he desires. We can surmise from **Numbers 24:2** that this location is closer to the Israelites because from here Balaam can see the Israelites encamped by tribes.

And Balaam lifted up his eyes and saw Israel camping tribe by tribe. And the Spirit of God came upon him, (**Numbers 24:2**)

Having seen the people all spread out before him, Balaam tells Balak to, “Build for me here seven altars.” Old habits are hard to break. It seems that this is part of the mystique that Balaam wraps around his “business.”

So What?

False Worship

We see in this chapter a vivid picture of false worship by those who think they are pleasing to God. We observe how Balaam prescribed the actions of worship and Balak dutifully performed the actions with full expectation of receiving from *Yahweh* that which is in his heart. Notice how false worship centers on the desires of man. Throughout the world there are church services today where the whole purpose is to satisfy the needs of the attendees under the guise of worshipping God. Many Christians get stuck in a rut by going through the motions week after week with an attitude of what it will do for them. Though their faith may be real, their worship is false.

Today, many Christians approach worship the same way that Balaam did. Even though Balaam did nothing and gave up nothing to prepare either the altars or the sacrifices, nonetheless he approached *Yahweh* with a claim of what he had done for God. This is nothing short of spiritual boasting. James tells us in his letter that such boasting is evil:

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”— yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. (**James 4:13-16**)

Notice that James declares that the successes or failures of our lives are according to God’s will, not our own efforts and planning. *How often we make plans and work hard to achieve our goals without*

recognizing the sovereignty of God. And such is our worship too, when we take credit for what He has done then approach Him in worship expecting something in return.

Balaam, the outwardly religious prophet, was like the Pharisees who made great claims of their religiosity while their faith was, in fact, void:

The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ (Luke 18:11-12)

Balaam’s focus was on his own actions, not on the person and character of God. He believed that by doing all these things he was blessing God, but his focus was on himself, not on God. This is a big man, little god religion; one that views man as being able to manipulate God to do his will. One of the signs of man centered religion is claiming personal qualities and accomplishments. True faith, however, is evidenced by a humble heart giving all the credit to God. We see this vividly in the heavenly scene portrayed by the Apostle John in the book of Revelation:

the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.” (Revelation 4:10-11)

And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, (Revelation 5:9)

True Worship

What does true worship look like? First, let’s look at the Greek word that is translated “worship” in the New Testament. It is the word *proskuneō*. This is made up of *pros*, meaning “to” or “toward” and *kuneō*, meaning “to kiss” or “to adore.” So, the Greek word literally means “to kiss toward.” In other words, it means to express our adoration toward another. According to *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*:

Literally, [*proskuneō* means] to kiss toward someone, to throw a kiss in token of respect or homage. The ancient oriental (especially Persian) mode of salutation between persons of equal ranks was to kiss each other on the lips; when the difference of rank was slight, they kissed each other on the cheek; when one was much inferior, he fell upon his knees and touched his forehead to the ground or prostrated himself, throwing kisses at the same time toward the superior. It is this latter mode of salutation that Greek writers express by *proskuneō*.

So, what does God want from us in our worship of Him? Does He want us to bow with our forehead on the ground and blow kisses at Him? When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well (at Mt. Gerizim), he correctly identified that she had been with five husbands and that the one she currently was with was not her own. Upon hearing this, the woman proclaimed that Jesus was a prophet. She then made a statement about worship, one that the Jews and Samaritans had been arguing about for years. She said:

Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” (John 4:20)

Jesus’ response to her reveals the characteristics of true worship:

Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to

worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:21-24)

Notice that the woman was focused on the form of worship. That is, she wanted to know where the proper place for worship was. But Jesus directed her focus off of the form and on to the essence of worship. He told her that worship should be according to knowledge:

You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

The Jews had the Holy Scriptures which taught them how to worship. Though the Samaritans knew of *Yahweh* and claimed to worship Him, they did so out of ignorance. The Jews had been given the oracles of God according to **Romans 3:2**. They had been given detailed instructions on what to do and what not to do by Moses. But they had made the place and form of worship the important thing and had lost the true meaning of worship. If we are to truly worship God, we must know who He is and what He has done. We must know what He expects of us. True worship starts out by knowing Who we worship. Jesus then told the woman what God wants in worship:

God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.

Jesus was saying that the *place* of worship isn't important. It's the heart of worship that's important. It's not what you do, or even how you do it. It's not the building, it's not the liturgy, it's not whether the music is contemporary or old fashioned, it's not how loud we sing or if we sing at all. The important thing is that we worship in spirit and in truth. True worship has nothing to do with the body. It's not in the raising of the hands or the bending of the knees or the lifting up of our voices in song. True worship comes from our spirit. First of all, it must be a regenerated spirit. That is, one must be a born again Christian to whom God has imputed righteousness. Then it must be a spirit that is in fellowship with God. If there is unconfessed sin in our life, then our fellowship with Him is broken and our worship becomes false.

Finally, our spirit must be submitted to His authority. Worship is recognizing who and what God is and what He has done for us. Let's look once again at the picture of corporate worship in heaven as John described it:

the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power ...” (**Revelation 4:10-11a**)

The way we worship is often reflected in the way we live our lives. If our worship of God is based on what we can get out of it, then we will live our lives based on what we can get out of life. When we worship God in spirit and in truth, humble ourselves before Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, then worship comes from a humble heart and a contrite spirit. This, then, is reflected in how we live our lives. If our worship is done for appearance sake, then our lives tend to be lived the same way. But if our worship is self sacrificing with a view to glorifying God for what He has done, then our lives tend to be lived the same way. In fact, we should live our lives, every moment of every day, as a form of worship.

Let us give our hearts to Him in true worship, for He is worthy!