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INTO YOUR FAVORITE BIBLE STORIES

4 – The Great Pretender – Balaam and the Talking Donkey.

*“Balaam's advice caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the LORD
Numbers 31:16*

Today we are looking at a specific incident that occurred during an historical account of the Israelites on their way to the promised land.

UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY

The Hebrew nation was a massive group of nomads, traditionally understood to be somewhere around one to two million people, traveling through regions of other inhabited lands.

The Hebrew people's accomplishments under God's control had struck fear into the heart of everyone in the path of their advancement.

The countries in their path faced, not just the challenge of a new neighbor but also the progress of God's purpose in the world and history.

It had been true since the day in which God had said to Joshua, “no man shall be able to stand before thee.”

Terror had gripped the nations wherever the story of the advancing Hebrews had spread. First **Jericho**, then **Moab** trembled before Jehovah God. Up next was **Midian**.

This story demonstrates that mankind, particularly when it chooses to oppose God's will, acts out of fear and desperation.

BALAK SUMMONS BALAAM

This is the account of the Moabites' king acting out of fear of the Israelites:

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Numbers 22:4-6 ESV

So Balak the son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, ⁵ sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor at Pethor, ...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. ⁶ Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed."

Balaam was an internationally renowned soothsayer, not a prophet as we think of God's prophets, but, to the king of Moab, he was an expert in determining the will of the pagan gods.

He thought that the Lord God of Israel was like any other deity whom he thought Balaam might be able to manipulate through pagan practices.

The letter of Balak to Balaam indicates his intent: *to bring a curse on a people who were under a blessing of a god.*

If God's blessing of the Israelites could be destroyed, then they would no longer be a threat.

Being a person who respects the gods and is sensitive to the natural order of sovereignty, Balaam consults the God of Israel.

God commands him not to curse the Hebrew nation – and to speak only the words from God.

Balaam complies. But God knows Balaam's heart and sends a warning.

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FROM THE MOUTH OF “BRAY” – a talking donkey?

Balaam was commissioned by King Balak of Moab with a soothsayers’ price to pronounce a curse on the children of Israel. In consultation with the Lord Balaam refused twice but the Lord handed him over to his own wickedness.

*22 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,... 23 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. 24 Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. 25 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. 26 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. 27 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.*

28 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?”

*29 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.” 30 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.”*

31 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. 32 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^[g] before me. 33 The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned

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aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live.”³⁴ Then Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, “I have sinned, for I did not know that you stood in the road against me. Now therefore, if it is evil in your sight, I will turn back.”³⁵ And the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, “Go with the men, but speak only the word that I tell you.” So, Balaam went on with the princes of Balak.

EVIL FINDS A WAY

In a fit of anger Balak sent Balaam home without reward, but the soothsayer’s greed was not to be denied.

The warning and experiences had been enough to convince Balaam that cursing Israel was out of the question.

However, Balaam counsels that there may be other ways to get the offering of fortune from the King.

After the king’s anger had cooled Balaam sent a plan of action to the Balak. Balaam’s counsel might be worth more to Balak than his magical arts.

Numbers 31:16

“Behold, these (evil ones), on Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the LORD in the incident of Peor...”

His teaching involved the most contemptible action ever conceived in an unregenerate heart; *Corrupt a people you cannot curse, and God will have to chasten them.*

In short, this means to take a people under divine blessing and deliberately lead them into sin to strip them of the divine blessing. Note how the New Testament interprets the act.

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2 Peter 2:15

They have followed the way of Balaam...who loved gain from wrongdoing”.

Revelation 2:14

“...who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice immorality”.

Following Balaam’s advice, Balak made friends with Israel and led them into temptation, corruption and ultimately to downfall.

REDEMPTION – God’s ultimate plan.

We have a redemptive pattern with God and His people.

God is pitted against foreign gods, or the practices carried out under their control.

God always wins by addressing the evil forces personally!

But why a donkey?

God’s message does not need the human instrument.

- He spoke to Moses from a burning bush.
- He spoke to Saul from the heavens on the road to Damascus.
- He spoke to Jesus at His Baptism from the sky with a dove as a visual.
- Jesus responded to the Pharisees concerning their demands to quiet the crowd as He entered the city of Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week, *“I tell you if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out!”* (Luke 19:40)

All of the conflict between the Children of Israel and the Moabites didn’t need to happen.

The 18th century theologian, Matthew Henry said in his commentary:

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[The people of Moab] needed not to fear any harm from [the Hebrew nation] if they knew (and it is probable that Moses let them know) the orders God had given to Israel not to contend with the Moabites, nor to use any hostility against them, (reference Deuteronomy 2:9).

Remember these things:

- The waging of war always begins with the principle of fear and selfish pride.
 - Balak was afraid of the strength and numbers of this new neighbor.
Fearing displacement from control and ownership.
- Earthly gain will take precedence over moral judgment if the heart is not fully attached to the love and Grace of God.
 - Balaam obviously wanted to obey the God of Israel,
 - But Balaam did not have a relationship with God.

- Jesus takes away the sin of the world

John 1:29 John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

John 16:33 "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

- You have the power to escape temptation through the power of the Holy Spirit

1 Corinthians 10:13 "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."