

Lesson 63

God Prepares the Way

God helped the Israelites defeat Amorite kings and receive blessings from Balaam.

Overview

Lesson Focus

To prepare the way into Canaan, God gave Moses and the Israelites two great victories over the Amorite kings Sihon and Og. The Israelites took possession of their lands, and two and a half tribes settled there. Moab and Midian hired the false prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites, but God caused him to bless them instead.

Key Passages

Deuteronomy 3:1–5; Numbers 22:28, 22:31–33, 23:11–12

Objectives

Students will be able to:

Describe the battles won over the Amorites.

Describe how God protected the Israelites from Balaam's curse.

Memory Verse

Deuteronomy 7:9 Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.

Prepare to Share

Scriptural Background

Prepare to teach by preparing your heart. Read the key passages for this lesson along with this background.

The 40 years of wandering ended, and the Israelites left the wilderness for Mount Seir, the land God gave to Esau and his descendants. The Israelites were forbidden peaceful passage through Edom, so they traveled around it to avoid conflict as God directed (Deuteronomy 2:5). The rebellious men of war age 20 and older had died, and God told Moses to head north toward Moab but not to engage Moab or Ammon in battle because their land was given to Lot (Deuteronomy 2:19). After skirting these lands, the Israelites requested permission to pass peacefully through the territory of the Amorite king Sihon. He refused and gathered his people to fight against them. God gave the Israelites victory over Sihon, and they captured his lands and settled in his cities, including his capital, Heshbon (Numbers 21:21–26). Moses then turned north to the land of Bashan, which was ruled by a giant king named Og. Og is described as the last of a race of giants called the Rephaim, and the dimensions of his bed indicate he was 9–12 feet tall (Deuteronomy 3:11)! Og and his people fought against the Israelites and were defeated. The Israelites wiped out

Og, his sons, and all his people and possessed his land (Numbers 21:33–35). These victories gave the Israelites confidence in God’s power to drive out their enemies as he promised. They did not need to fear giants or fortified cities. The land of the Amorite kings conquered by Moses and the Israelites became the inheritance of the Reubenites, Gadites, and half-tribe of Manasseh (Deuteronomy 3:12–17).

Balak, the king of Moab, heard about the victories of Israel against the Amorites and was overcome with fear. He gathered the leaders of Midian and devised a plan to hire Balaam to curse the Israelites. Balaam practiced divination and was known for effective curses. Balaam refused to come at first, but then he agreed to accompany the princes of Moab to King Balak (Numbers 22:1–21). But God knew Balaam’s motives were not good, so he sent an angel to stand in his path. Three times the angel of the Lord appeared, and Balaam’s donkey saw him and saved Balaam’s life by refusing to go forward. Angry at his seemingly disobedient donkey, Balaam struck her each time she saved his life. Then the Lord miraculously enabled the donkey to speak, and the conversation between Balaam and his donkey revealed the dullness of Balaam to recognize his error. When God opened his eyes to see the angel, Balaam admitted his sin and said he would return home. But God told him to continue to Balak but to speak only the word God told him (Numbers 22:22–35). Balak took Balaam to three locations overlooking the Israelites, and each time Balaam pronounced a blessing on them (Numbers 23–24). Balak was angry with Balaam and refused to honor him (Numbers 24:10–11).

Although Balaam was used to bless the Israelites, he also caused great punishment to fall on them. It was Balaam who recommended that the Moabites and Midianites entice Israel to sin by worshipping pagan gods and intermarrying with their neighbors (Revelation 2:14). This led to God’s punishment of a plague that destroyed 24,000 Israelites (Numbers 25:9). God later commanded Moses to retaliate against Midian (Numbers 25:16–18), and Balaam was killed along with five Midianite kings (Numbers 31:7–8).

Historical/Apologetics Background

Several people groups are mentioned in the account of the Israelites’ travel from the wilderness to the land of Canaan. Because few artifacts survived from these peoples who lived 2,000 to 3,000 years ago, many archaeologists were skeptical about their existence. However, evidence from modern-day Jordan reveals that these people did live at the eastern border of what would become Israel’s land. The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, Jacob’s twin brother (Genesis 36). The mountain region of Seir was given by God to Esau, which is why he forbade the Israelites from engaging the Edomites in battle. The origin of Edom, meaning “red” in Hebrew, was associated with Esau (Genesis 25:30) and may also be connected to the red sandstone of the region. Evidence of the by-product of smelting ore has been found in the region, indicating the presence of extensive copper mining in Edom.

The Moabites and Ammonites were both descended from Abraham’s nephew, Lot, by his own daughters (Genesis 19:37–38). An Ammonite palace with defensive walls was found at archaeological sites at the Citadel in Amman,

Jordan. The Moabite Stone, discovered in 1868, confirmed the names of many Old Testament places as well as Chemosh, the Moabite god.

The miracle of Balaam's donkey speaking to him on the road is another area skeptics like to mock. However, in the case of Balaam's donkey and the serpent in the Garden of Eden, the animals were a vessel enabled by another being to speak. Satan spoke through the serpent to Eve, enticing her to doubt God's Word and disobey his command. But it was the Lord who opened the mouth of Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22:28) to rebuke the false prophet and stop his mad course for material gain (2 Peter 2:15–16; cf. Jude 11). The dialogue between a "stubborn" donkey and her angry master also serves to accentuate the stubbornness of Balaam to pursue his own course. It was not until God opened his eyes to the angel of the Lord blocking his path with a drawn sword that Balaam admitted his sin and offered to return home (Numbers 22:31–35).

Although Balaam prophesied the words God gave him and blessed the Israelites, he is remembered as the one who caused the Israelites to stumble and receive God's punishment. Balaam gave Balak the idea to intermarry his people with the Israelites and invite them to their pagan feasts. In so doing, the Israelites were led astray to idolatry and immorality (Numbers 25:1–8; Revelation 2:14). This compromising practice of Balaam is dangerous for any time and culture. The Israelites let their pagan neighbors influence them rather than standing firm on the Word of God and his laws. During the early days of the church, Jesus rebuked the church at Pergamos for the same sin—allowing people to compromise the Word of God with pagan ideas. Today, Satan uses the same tactic in churches as he tricks many Christians and their leaders into compromising with the world rather than standing firm on the authority of Scripture. May we not trust in the fallible assumptions of man, but rather trust in the Word of the omniscient God.

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