

The Book of Numbers, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 15: The Oracles of Balaam

Numbers 23:1–24:25

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

What is doctrinally at stake in these chapters is the unbreakable reliability of God's word and God's blessing. Balaam tries every method known to a professional diviner, multiplied altars, repeated sacrifices, fresh vantage points, and none of it can wring a curse out of God against His people. The repeated refrain, that God is not a man that He should lie, that what He has blessed cannot be reversed, anchors the whole passage. Teach this so the class sees that the security of God's people does not rest on their performance but on His faithful character and spoken promise, a truth that flowers fully in Romans 8 where no one can bring a charge against God's elect in Christ.

The fourth oracle requires careful, confident handling. The Star out of Jacob and the Scepter out of Israel is a genuine Messianic prophecy, and it is fulfilled in Jesus the Christ who reigns now at the right hand of God over His kingdom, the church established at Pentecost. Guard the class against reading it as a prediction of a future earthly political kingdom of national Israel. The scepter is already wielded; the King already rules. At the same time, hold Balaam himself in proper light. Scripture never makes him a model of faith. The New Testament condemns the way of Balaam for greed and for later counseling Moab to seduce Israel into sin at Peor. Both things are true at once: God can speak truth through an unworthy mouth, and that mouth's owner can still be lost.

For the spiritual formation of the student, the danger of Balaam is uncomfortably close to home. Here is a man who said magnificent, accurate things about God while his heart was set on money. That gap between true words and a divided heart is a temptation for every believer, and especially for any who teach. Aim to leave the class examining not just what they say about the Lord but whom they actually serve, and resting their whole confidence in the reigning Christ whose blessing no enemy can revoke.

Question 1

Student Question:

Three times Balaam builds seven altars and offers sacrifices, then goes off expecting the Lord to meet him (Numbers 23:1–5, 14–16, 29–30). What do these elaborate efforts to manipulate God reveal about Balaam's view of Him, and how does Numbers 23:8 (how can I curse whom God has not cursed) correct that view?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter opens with Balaam directing Balak to build seven altars and to prepare seven bulls and seven rams (Numbers 23:1-2). The numbers and the ritual are meant to impress, perhaps even to obligate, the Lord. Balaam then withdraws to a bare height, hoping the Lord will meet him with a usable word (Numbers 23:3). This is religion as transaction, an attempt to set the terms and purchase the outcome. It is the very opposite of the humble, listening obedience God desires.

What Balaam gets instead is a word he cannot control. God puts a word in his mouth (Numbers 23:5), and that word is blessing. The first oracle frames the central question of the whole passage: how can I curse whom God has not cursed, and how can I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced (Numbers 23:8)? The hired curse is dead on arrival, not because Balaam lacks skill, but because God has already spoken.

Balak repeats the ritual twice more (Numbers 23:14, 29), and each time the result is the same. The escalating altars expose a heart that thinks God can be maneuvered. Israel had its own version of this temptation in the wilderness, and so do we whenever we treat worship as leverage rather than surrender.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God cannot be manipulated by ritual, repetition, or religious bargaining; He is to be obeyed, not managed.
- True worship is submission to God's revealed will, not an attempt to bend His will to ours.
- A curse pronounced against those God has blessed has no power; the verdict belongs to God alone.
- Outward religious correctness (right altars, right sacrifices) can mask a heart that is far from God.

Discussion Prompts

- In what subtle ways do believers today treat worship or prayer as a transaction to get what they want from God?
- How does Numbers 23:8 reframe the way we should think about people who try to harm God's people?
- What is the difference between asking God for something and trying to corner God into something?

Question 2

Student Question:

Balak keeps moving Balaam to a new high place, hoping the verdict will change with the view (Numbers 23:13, 27). Where in your own life have you tried changing your circumstances, hoping to get a different answer from God instead of submitting to the answer He has already given?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Balak's strategy is almost comical in its persistence. When the first vantage point yields a blessing, he says, come with me to another place from which you may see them, and curse them for me from there (Numbers 23:13). When that fails, he tries a third site (Numbers 23:27). He keeps changing the view, certain the verdict will change with it.

This is a picture of a heart that will not accept God's answer and keeps hunting for a more agreeable one. We do the same when we move from counselor to counselor, church to church, or rationalization to rationalization, looking for someone or something to ratify the conclusion we have already decided we want.

The text quietly insists that the answer does not live in the location. It lives in the unchanging will of God. No new angle, no new altar, no fresh start in a fresh place will turn God's blessing into a curse or His no into a yes.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Changing circumstances does not change God's revealed will; we are called to submit, not to keep shopping for a better answer.
- Restlessly seeking a different verdict is often a sign of a heart unwilling to obey the verdict already given.
- God's consistency is a mercy, not an obstacle; His settled word is what makes Him trustworthy.

Discussion Prompts

- Where might you be moving to a new vantage point, hoping for a different answer from God than the one He has already given?
- How can we tell the difference between honestly seeking wise counsel and shopping for permission?
- What does Balak's behavior reveal about the human heart when it does not get the answer it wants?

Question 3

Student Question:

In the first oracle Balaam says Israel is a people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations (Numbers 23:9). What does it mean for God's people to be set apart, and how does that truth carry forward to the church as a chosen and holy people in the world today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In the first oracle Balaam describes Israel as a people dwelling alone, and not reckoning itself among the nations (Numbers 23:9). Israel was set apart, not because they were larger or

stronger, but because the Lord had claimed them as His own and given them a calling none of the surrounding nations shared.

This distinctiveness was always meant to point beyond itself. Israel was set apart so that through them all the families of the earth could be blessed, a promise that finds its goal in Christ. The separateness was never mere isolation; it was holiness, belonging wholly to God.

The same calling carries forward to the church, which Peter describes as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession (1 Peter 2:9). We too are to dwell distinct, not by geography but by holiness of life, while remaining in the world to bless it with the gospel.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's people are set apart by His choice and calling, not by their own merit or size.
- Holiness means belonging wholly to God and living distinctly, not retreating from the world.
- Israel's separateness pointed forward to the church as a chosen and holy people in Christ.
- Being set apart is for the sake of blessing the nations, not for proud isolation.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it look like in practice to live as a people set apart while still engaging the world for Christ?
- How is the church's distinctiveness similar to and different from Israel's?
- Where are you tempted to blend in with the nations rather than dwell distinct as God's own?

Question 4

Student Question:

Numbers 23:21 says God has seen no iniquity in Jacob, even though Israel had sinned repeatedly in the wilderness. How does it move you to know that God can look on His covenant people and pronounce blessing rather than condemnation, and how should that shape the way you receive His mercy in Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The second oracle contains a startling line: He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, nor has He seen wickedness in Israel (Numbers 23:21). This is not a claim that Israel was sinless; the wilderness chapters are a long record of their rebellions. It is a declaration of how God, in covenant mercy, chooses to regard His people whom He has not abandoned.

There is gospel light here. God's people are not held under a perpetual sentence of condemnation, because God Himself has set His love and His blessing on them. For us this

anticipates the deeper mercy of Christ, in whom there is now no condemnation for those who are in Him (Romans 8:1).

We should receive this not as license but as wonder. The God who sees everything chooses, for the sake of His covenant, to pronounce blessing over His people. Such mercy is meant to melt the heart into grateful, loving obedience, not to make us careless.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's covenant mercy means He does not deal with His people only according to their failures.
- This is not a denial that Israel sinned, but a statement of how God graciously regards His own.
- The verse anticipates the fuller mercy of no condemnation in Christ (Romans 8:1).
- Grace received rightly produces gratitude and obedience, not carelessness about sin.

Discussion Prompts

- How does it change your day to believe that God, who sees all, chooses to bless rather than condemn His people?
- How can we hold together God's mercy toward His people and His call to holiness, without abusing either?
- What sin or failure are you carrying that you need to surrender to the mercy of God in Christ?

Question 5

Student Question:

Balaam declares that God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should change His mind, and that what He has blessed cannot be reversed (Numbers 23:19-20). What does this teach about the trustworthiness of God's word, and why is that unchanging word the only solid ground for our hope?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here is the doctrinal heart of the passage. God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good (Numbers 23:19)? Then comes the verdict: behold, I have received a command to bless; He has blessed, and I cannot reverse it (Numbers 23:20).

Human beings make promises and break them, change their minds, deceive. God does none of these. His word is as reliable as His character, and His character does not shift. What He has spoken, He will perform. This is why a hired prophet cannot reverse a divine blessing; the blessing rests on the unchanging God.

For the believer this is bedrock. Our hope is not anchored in our feelings, our consistency, or our circumstances, all of which waver. It is anchored in the word of a God who cannot lie (Titus 1:2). When everything around us is uncertain, His spoken promise stands.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's word is utterly reliable because God's character is unchanging; He cannot lie.
- What God has spoken, He will certainly perform; His promises do not fail.
- A blessing grounded in God's word cannot be reversed by any human effort or hostility.
- Christian hope rests on God's faithful word, not on our shifting feelings or circumstances.

Discussion Prompts

- Which promise of God do you most need to lean your full weight on this week?
- How does the unchangeableness of God steady us when our circumstances are shaking?
- Why is God's truthfulness, more than any other comfort, the real foundation of Christian hope?

Question 6

Student Question:

The second oracle says the Lord their God is with them, and the shout of a King is among them (Numbers 23:21). What difference would it make this week if you truly lived as though the King were present in your life, your home, and your worship?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The second oracle declares, the Lord their God is with them, and the shout of a King is among them (Numbers 23:21). Israel's security flowed from a present King and a present God, not from numbers or weapons. The shout is the acclamation of a people who know their King is in their midst.

It is one thing to confess that God is King and another to live as though He truly reigns over our calendars, our homes, and our wallets. The presence of the King is meant to reorder everything, the way a room changes when the most important person walks in.

For us the King has come even nearer. Christ, the One Balaam glimpsed from afar, now reigns and has promised, I am with you always (Matthew 28:20). To live under that present reign is to walk through ordinary days conscious that the King is here.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's presence as King among His people is the true source of their security.
- Confessing Christ as King should reshape daily life, not remain an abstract belief.
- The reigning Christ is present with His people now, not distant or merely future.

Discussion Prompts

- What would actually change in your week if you lived as though the King were present in every room you enter?
- Where do you treat Christ's kingship as a Sunday confession rather than a Monday reality?
- How does the promise of His abiding presence steady you in fear or temptation?

Question 7

Student Question:

Twice Balaam confesses that no enchantment or divination works against Israel, because God has done this for them (Numbers 23:23). What does this say about every modern attempt, whether spiritual, social, or political, to come against the people God has blessed (compare Romans 8:31)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Balaam, a professional in omens and spells, is forced to admit, surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, nor any divination against Israel (Numbers 23:23). The tools of his trade are powerless against a people God has chosen to bless. The reason given is simple and final: it now must be said of Jacob and of Israel, what God has done.

Every age has its Balaks who hire their Balaams, whether through occult means, slander, political pressure, or social hostility, to bring down the people of God. This verse declares that all such efforts ultimately fail against those whom God has blessed. The work is His, and no counter-spell touches it.

Paul gives the New Testament echo: if God is for us, who can be against us (Romans 8:31)? Not curse, not accusation, not death itself can separate God's people in Christ from His love. The opposition is real, but the outcome is not in doubt.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- No spiritual power, curse, or scheme can ultimately prevail against those God has blessed.
- The security of God's people rests on what God has done, not on their own strength.
- Opposition to the church is real but cannot finally succeed (Romans 8:31–39).
- Believers need not live in fear of curses, omens, or hostile powers.

Discussion Prompts

- How does this truth free believers from fear of curses, the occult, or hostile powers?
- What modern forms does opposition to God's people take, and how should Romans 8:31 shape our response?
- Where do you need to trade anxiety about your enemies for confidence in what God has done?

Question 8

Student Question:

Numbers 24:1 says that when Balaam saw it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, he no longer went looking for omens. What habit of looking for signs, luck, or shortcuts do you need to set aside so you can simply trust what God has already made plain in His word?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

A small but telling shift opens chapter 24. When Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, he did not go as at other times, to seek to use sorcery (Numbers 24:1). For the first time he stops hunting for omens and simply lets the Spirit of God speak through him. Even Balaam, late and partial, learns that looking for signs is pointless once God's will is plain.

We are prone to the same restlessness, looking for confirmations, lucky signs, open doors, and feelings, when God has already spoken clearly in His word. The hunt for hidden signs can become a way of avoiding plain obedience.

Maturity means setting aside the search for shortcuts and resting in what God has revealed. The will of God is not mostly a mystery to be decoded; much of it is a word to be obeyed.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Seeking signs and omens is needless when God's will is already revealed in His word.
- The hunt for hidden confirmations can become a substitute for plain obedience.
- Spiritual maturity rests in God's clear word rather than in luck, feelings, or shortcuts.

Discussion Prompts

- What habit of seeking signs, luck, or shortcuts might you need to lay down in favor of trusting God's clear word?
- How can we tell the difference between godly discernment and a restless search for omens?
- Where has God already spoken plainly to you in Scripture, so that no further sign is needed?

Question 9

Student Question:

In the fourth oracle Balaam foresees a Star out of Jacob and a Scepter out of Israel, a ruler who will reign (Numbers 24:17–19). The New Testament shows this fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah, who is now reigning at God's right hand over His kingdom, the church, not in a future earthly political kingdom of national Israel. Yet the same New Testament condemns the way of Balaam for greed and for later teaching Israel to sin (2 Peter 2:15–16; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14). How do you hold these two truths together, that God spoke true and glorious words about Christ through a man who was not a man of faith?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The fourth oracle rises to its summit: 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 (Numbers 24:17). The star and the scepter are images of royalty and dominion. Balaam, peering down the centuries, sees a coming King who will reign. This is a true Messianic prophecy, and it is fulfilled in Jesus the Christ.

We must read its fulfillment rightly. The Star has risen and the Scepter is wielded now. Christ was raised and seated at God's right hand, and He reigns over His kingdom, the church, which was established at Pentecost. The prophecy is not awaiting a future earthly political kingdom of national Israel; the King already rules, and His dominion has no end. The wise men who followed His star understood that a King had been born (Matthew 2:2).

And yet we must not mistake the messenger for a man of faith. The New Testament is severe about the way of Balaam. Peter says he loved the wages of unrighteousness (2 Peter 2:15). Jude lists him among the lost (Jude 11). The risen Christ Himself condemns the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before Israel (Revelation 2:14), the very seduction at Peor that comes next in our study. So hold both truths firmly. God can put true and glorious words about His Son into the mouth of a greedy, faithless man, and that man can still be lost. The truth of the prophecy depends on God, not on the worthiness of the prophet, and the gift of speaking truth is no substitute for a heart surrendered to the King it proclaims.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Star and Scepter (Numbers 24:17) is a genuine Messianic prophecy fulfilled in Jesus the Christ.
- Christ reigns now, seated at God's right hand over His kingdom, the church established at Pentecost; this is not a future earthly political kingdom of national Israel.
- God can speak true prophecy through an unworthy, faithless instrument; the truth rests on God, not the speaker.
- Scripture never holds Balaam up as a model; the way of Balaam is condemned for greed and for leading Israel into sin (2 Peter 2:15–16; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14).
- Speaking right words about Christ is no substitute for a heart surrendered to Him.

Discussion Prompts

- How does it strengthen your confidence in Scripture that God spoke true words about Christ even through a faithless man?
- Why does it matter that we read the Star and Scepter as fulfilled in Christ's present reign rather than a future earthly kingdom?
- What warning is there for us in a man who proclaimed the Messiah yet was lost through greed and compromise?

Question 10

Student Question:

Balaam saw the Star from far off and said, but not now, I behold him, but not near (Numbers 24:17). You live on the other side of that promise; the Star has risen and the King reigns now. Name one specific way the reigning Christ is reshaping your loyalties, your speech, or your money, calling you to be unlike Balaam and wholly His.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Balaam saw the King from a great distance: but not now, I behold him, but not near (Numbers 24:17). He stood on the far side of the promise, glimpsing a dawn he would never walk in. We stand on the other side. The Star has risen. The King is enthroned. What Balaam saw faintly from a ridge in Moab, we know fully in the face of Jesus Christ.

That changes everything about how we live. We are not waiting on a distant maybe; we serve a reigning Lord. The right response is not awe at a far-off figure but daily allegiance to a present King, an allegiance that reaches into our speech, our priorities, and our money, the very places where Balaam failed.

The capstone challenge is to be unlike Balaam. He spoke of the King but served his wallet. We are called to belong wholly to the King we proclaim, letting His reign reshape the things we most tightly grip.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- We live on the fulfilled side of the promise Balaam saw from afar; the King reigns now.
- Allegiance to the reigning Christ must reach into speech, priorities, and money.
- The capstone call is to be unlike Balaam, wholly devoted rather than divided in heart.

Discussion Prompts

- Name one specific area, your speech, your loyalties, or your money, where the reigning Christ is reshaping you now.
- Where in your life is there a Balaam-like gap between what you say about Christ and what you actually serve?
- What is one concrete step this week to live as a wholly devoted subject of the King rather than a divided one?