

# The Book of Numbers

## Lesson 15: The Oracles of Balaam -- Numbers 23:1–24:25

Picture the scene from the high places of Moab. Down on the plains by the Jordan, spread out like the dust of the earth, lies the camp of Israel. And up on the ridge stands a strange trio: Balak, the frightened king of Moab; Balaam, a freelance prophet who has come a long way for a fat fee; and seven freshly built altars, smoke curling up into a clear morning sky. Balak has paid good money for one thing, a curse strong enough to break the people he cannot beat in battle. He has the wrong man for the job, though Balaam does not yet seem to know it. You can almost feel the tension. Everyone is waiting to hear what words will come out of this man's mouth.

And here is the wonder of it. Every time Balaam opens his mouth to curse, blessing comes out instead. Four times he tries. Four times God overrides him. Balak drags him from peak to peak, hoping a change of scenery will change the verdict, the way a gambler keeps pulling the lever expecting a different result. But the word will not bend. God does not lie or change His mind. He has set His love on this people, and no spell, no fee, no clever angle from any hired prophet can undo what God has spoken. The curse keeps turning to blessing because the One behind the blessing keeps His word.

Then, in the fourth oracle, the language lifts off the ground entirely. Balaam, a man who loved the wages of unrighteousness, finds himself saying words far bigger than Moab, far bigger than his own small heart. I see him, but not now, he says. I behold him, but not near. A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel. A king is coming. A reign is coming. The greedy prophet on the ridge is pointing past the tents in the valley to a throne that will outlast every kingdom on earth, the throne of the Messiah Himself.

We tend to think God only speaks through people we admire, and only blesses when we have earned it. This chapter quietly takes that idea apart. God can use even an unwilling, money-loving man to bless His people and tell the truth about His Son. And God's blessing on His own does not rest on our cleverness or our worthiness; it rests on His faithful word. As you read these oracles, ask yourself the question that runs underneath the whole story. If God has spoken His blessing over those who belong to Him, who exactly do you think is going to undo it? When the next Balak in your life hires the next Balaam to speak you down, will you remember whose word stands forever?

**Group Discussion:** When have you watched someone try hard to bring something down, a reputation, a marriage, a church, a faith, only to see God turn the whole effort into a blessing instead? What did that teach you about who is really in control?

**Personal Reflection:** Balaam said true and beautiful words about God while his own heart was set on money. Where are you tempted to say the right things about the Lord while quietly serving something else, and what would it take to bring your heart into line with your words?

*Read Numbers 23:1–24:25*

## **Study Questions**

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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)?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

## Digging Deeper

**Reflect on these passages:** Romans 8:31-39, no one can bring a charge or a curse against those whom God has justified in Christ; 2 Peter 2:15-16, Peter names the way of Balaam, who loved the wages of unrighteousness, and the rebuke from the donkey; Revelation 2:14, the risen Christ warns the church against those who hold the teaching of Balaam that led Israel into sin; Matthew 2:1-2, the wise men follow His star, an echo of the Star out of Jacob now risen in Christ; Romans 15:4, whatever was written before was written for our learning, that we might have hope

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