**Expect Opposition**

**Numbers 22-25**

February 17, 2019

Dr. Ritch Boerckel

Today we’re going to be looking at Numbers 22-25. Today in the Scripture reading, we won’t be reading that entire section. This is a very fascinating part of the life of Moses. And really, it doesn’t even name Moses in the story. But it’s a big part of this event of the Exodus, as the children of Israel are about ready to enter the Promised Land. And if you’re a Sunday School student today, for you children, you’ll know perhaps Balaam’s story by remembering about the talking donkey. And so that’s one of the things that makes this story so fascinating. We’re just going to read that part of the story this morning. But we’re going to talk about a much broader section from Numbers 22-25, to glean some truth that God has for us to receive from this whole section. We’re going to begin with verse 22. Balaam is going away with some princes that king Balak of Moab sent to entice him to curse the people of Israel. So God is angry now with Balaam because of his cooperation with these princes who are planning to stand against Israel. So that’s the context here.

***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, and his two servants were with him.* ***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 before me.* ***33*** *The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned 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.*

May God encourage us through His Word today!

What a fascinating story, this one is, of the strange soothsayer named Balaam! Balaam is strange for a number of reasons. First, he is not an Israelite, and yet he knows Yahweh, the covenant keeping God. Yahweh speaks to him and Balaam submits to Yahweh and speaks the words that Yahweh gives him to speak. He is well known throughout this region to be a soothsayer, a person with an ability to call upon gods for cursing and for blessing. So he is strange in this way. Secondly, he is strange because he is very conflicted in his soul. On the one hand, he appears to honor the Lord; to hold the Lord in esteem. He refuses to say anything other than the word that comes from God. But on the other hand, he dishonors the Lord. He tries to get around the Lord’s will and the Lord’s wishes. He looks for a way out, to do his own will rather than the will of God. Ultimately, he is going to be shown for what he is. He is a false prophet whom God punishes with death. Finally, Balaam is unique and strange because he talks with a donkey. This incident is what most Sunday School children remember him for. The story is rather long and involved, but it’s worth retelling, so let’s jump in!

As we enter into Numbers chapter 22, w remember that God has just recently given the Israelites victory in some battles. So first was with the king of Arad, and then with King Sihon, and then King Og. So these three kings all come out against the Lord and the Lord’s people as they are about to enter the Promised Land. And each time, the Lord defeats the enemy so that there aren’t any survivors left, for instance, to King Og of Bashan. And the people now are settling in the plains of Moab. They’ve moved from the northern end of the Promised Land eastward, and they’re going around the Red Sea up on the eastern side of Israel, in order to enter across the Jordan River into Jericho. But for now, they’re in the plains of Moab. And Moab’s king, a guy by the name of Balak, is terrified! He has heard the reputation of this people; that they were delivered by the Lord out of Egypt, that mighty empire, through wonders. He has heard how this mighty people have moved through the desert for 40 years and survived. He’s heard of these three recent battles with the king of Arad, King Og and King Sihon, and how they all fell before this amazing mass of people. And now these people, some 2,000,000 strong, are camping in his backyard. He knows he is not able to defeat them militarily, so he’s looking for a secret weapon. He discovers that secret weapon in this prophet by the name of Balaam.

Balaam is very well known throughout that world to have the ability of a diviner, a soothsayer, one who is able to place curses and blessing upon a people. And so King Balak of Moab sends messengers to Balaam. And these messengers say, “Behold, a people has come up out of Egypt.” So they know about this people. They know where they come from. They know their history. They know of Yahweh’s power and blessing upon them. He says, “They cover the face of the earth. They’re more in number than can hardly be described, and here they are. So Balaam, please come over to Moab. Come over to our side and curse these people. It’s the only way that we have any hope of defeating them in battle.” Now, God had already told Moses not to attack the Moabites, so they were actually safe. All of this planning was futile and unnecessary because they weren’t going to do any harm to the Moabites. But either Balak didn’t know that or he didn’t believe that. And so he was looking for a way to tip the scales in his favor. He thought, “If you curse them, Balaam, then perhaps we’ll be strong enough to take them in battle.” He sends these messengers with bags and bags of money.

So the Lord comes and says to Balaam, “Hey, who are these people with you?” Balaam has invited them to stay a bit longer, to converse with him. He sees their bags of money. He begins to drool. He sees the silver and gold beginning to spill out of these bags. He invites them to stick around a bit and even to stay the night. And the Lord comes to Balaam and says, “Hey, who are these people with you?” Keep in mind that God never asks a question in order to obtain information. So God is not asking because He doesn’t know who they are. “Tell me, Balaam. You have the inside scoop.” No, the Lord knows exactly who these folks are. The Lord asks Balaam this question to convict Balaam that he is hanging around the wrong group of people. He’s hanging around and making friends with a group of people who want to curse the people of God. And so Balaam acts innocent. He says, “Well, here’s who these people are.” He’s not convicted by the question. He’s still making excuses in his own mind of why it’s okay to hang out with these messengers from Moab. Then the Lord says very straightforwardly

**Numbers 22:12** God said to Balaam, “You shall not go with them. You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.”

You might mark that. It’s very key to understanding this story. In the morning, Balaam comes to the princes. Remember, he invited them to stay the night. In the morning, he says, “Guys, I have to have a hard conversation with you. Listen, you guys need to go back to your homes. The Lord has refused to let me go with you.” And so they go back and they tell King Balak this whole story. Well King Balak thinks, “Balaam is just holding out for more money.” So he sends more princes, a greater entourage with more bags of money, back to talk to Balaam. He shows Balaam the money. Balaam then retorts in verse 18,

**Numbers 22:18** “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the LORD my God to do less or more.

This sounds great, right? He calls the Lord, “the LORD my God.” So he’s aligning himself on the side of the LORD, Yahweh. He uses the covenant keeping name of God, the LORD. He doesn’t just talk about God in general. This is the God who revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush. And he says, “Even if Balak were to give me houses full of silver and gold, I couldn’t go beyond the command of the LORD my God.” It sounds great, right? We’d be wrong if we’d understand Balaam’s words positively. Here’s a principle. A few sound words of commitment to God do not prove a heart commitment to God. Let’s keep that in mind. Coming and feeling a bit of emotion and singing some songs, “*Have Thine Own Way, Lord, Have Thine Own Way*,” doesn’t mean our heart really is aligned with the Lord. Balaam’s heart is not right before the Lord. It’s still divided.

Balaam’s heart is really with Balak’s money. He knows he can’t defy the Lord. The Lord is powerful. He’s not stupid that way. He says, “I know that if I just fully disobey the Lord, bad things are going to happen to me.” He gets that. He’s going to have to pay the price if he just directly disobeys the Lord. But he’s thinking perhaps he can maneuver around the will of the Lord, not directly crossing God, and yet still obtain this money. So after this bold pronouncement of commitment to obey the Lord, Balaam says, “Why don’t you stay the night? Perhaps the LORD will give me a word;” in other words, “a word that you’ll like.” If Balaam had been serious about honoring the Lord, about worshiping the Lord, Balaam would have provided some sack lunches of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and sent them on their way. He would have said, “It’s time for you guys to get out of the house, now. Go! There’s no reason to stay here.” But he’s not. He says, “Oh, let’s just talk a little more. I’m really enjoying the company, here.” He’s looking for a way around the will of the Lord, to still appease and please this group of people while not directly disrespecting God.

**Numbers 22:20** And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, “If the men have come to call you, rise, go with them; but only do what I tell you.”

Now wait a minute! We’re a bit confused. Remember in verse 12 God says, “Don’t go with these guys.” And now after this finagling by Balaam, God comes to him and He says, “If the men have come to call you, rise and go with them.” Now this is where the story gets really, really interesting! What does God mean when He tells Balaam that it’s okay to go with these princes? Did God change His mind from verse 12 when He told him not to go? Well, an oracle that God gives to Balaam later in the story, in chapter 23, is actually going to tell us the answer to that question. If you look forward to Numbers 23:19, you read something that’s really important to understand about the character of God.

**Numbers 23:19** 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?

God never lies. He’s never fickle. He never says one thing and then says another and contradicts Himself. When God says something, He needs only say it once. So what is happening here? On the one hand He says, “Don’t go!” Then He says, “Okay, you can go.” Why does God seem to change His mind and let Balaam go? And then, when Balaam actually takes Him up on that offer, God gets angry at Balaam. Why does He get angry at Balaam if He told him it’s okay to go? I believe what is happening here is that God is testing or proving Balaam’s heart. You see, God is not merely interested in our external obedience, external conformity. He’s not interested in kind of a legalistic kind of faith that says “I’ll stay within the lines in order to not suffer these terrible consequences.” God is interested in a heart that is broken of selfishness and self-centeredness; a heart that says, “God, the only purpose for living is You. That’s what my life is about.” Balaam doesn’t have that heart. God is using these circumstances to test where Balaam is in relationship to his heart, to expose his heart for what it is. In Deuteronomy chapter 6, we’re going to talk about this passage next week, God says

**Deuteronomy 6:4-5** “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

Listen up really closely! There’s not many gods. There’s one God! And here is the foundation for everything the Lord says. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. It’s every part of you in love and devotion and commitment to this one true God.

Let me use a human illustration to share with you what I think is happening here, the dynamics of this conversation. Imagine there is a married couple and the man has had a terrible gambling problem. The home has suffered miserably for it. They have a second mortgage on their house. They’re barely making ends meet because of the debt they have to pay for the gambling. The fund that was to be for college for the kids is completely obliterated, all because this guy chose to gamble. It’s a terrible situation! Finally, he comes to his senses because he has to. He’s just at the end of his rope financially, in his marriage, and in every way. He says, “I’m through with gambling.” And for one year, he is through with gambling. They begin to get their house in order.

Then one night, his gambling buddies come to the house. It’s the first time in a year they’ve come to the house. They say, “Hey, there’s a new casino in town. We’re all going out. Do you want to come?” His heart jumps. His heart is there with them. But he looks over at his wife and his wife is crossing her arms. She knows the misery that his sin had brought on the whole house. She’s heard him say for a year that he’s through with that. But she also sees the excitement he has in going. He looks at her and says, “Honey, can I go with my friends?” She says, “No! You shall not go with them.” He says, “I’m not going to gamble. I’ll just go with them.” She says, “No! You shall not go with them.” He says, “Okay.” And he tells his friends, “My wife said I can’t go.” Now what is happening in the wife’s heart right now? She’s asking, “Why did he say that ‘my wife said I can’t go?’ Why don’t you tell them that you don’t want to go? If your heart was there with the family instead of with gambling and frittering away our future, you’d tell them ‘I’m not going to go.’” Did you notice what Balaam said? He said, “The Lord told me I can’t go.” He doesn’t say, “I’m not going to go because I’m not going to curse God’s people.” He says, “The Lord told me.” He’s pushing it off.

So then he says, “But guys, you know, you have some hours before you have to go to the casino. It’s not going to be open for a little while. Come on in! Let’s play some pool down in our basement and let’s just talk. It’s been a long time.” These guys come in. His wife knows their influence. She knows what they’re all about and how they led her husband into destruction. He invites them into their home and she hears them just laughing it up and talking. They’re about ready to leave and she’s wondering, “Where is my husband’s heart? If my husband’s heart is really with them, it’s going to end up that’s where he is going to go. I have to find out where my husband’s heart is.” So she says, “Okay. If you want to go with those guys, you can go. But just don’t gamble.” And happily, he gets on his coat and out he goes.

What is the heart of the wife at that point? She’s rightly upset because she knows that her husband’s heart is not with the family, to love the family. Her husband’s heart is really with this sin that destroyed the family. And when God says, “Okay, you can go,” He’s testing Balaam’s heart. He’s saying, “If your heart is really with Me, you’re going to tell them. It’s not just because externally I conformed you. I made you do something that you didn’t really want to do. It’s because you realize this is where my heart needs to be. It needs to be with the Lord, the God who blesses people.”

So here is Balaam. He’s happy! “The Lord says I can go!” He gets on his donkey. Now the text tells us the Lord is really angry at Balaam because Balaam has shown that his heart is with these God-defiers, these ones who would dishonor the Lord, these ones who would destroy God’s people, who would disrupt God’s good plan. And so He sends the angel of the LORD to block the path of the donkey. And the angel of the LORD has a sword in His hand. Who is this? I believe the angel of the LORD is none other than the eternal Son of God. If you study that in the Old Testament, I think you’ll come to agree with me that wherever the angel of the LORD appears, it is a pre-incarnate appearance of God the Son. This is the One who would take on flesh and be called Jesus 1400 years after this story.

So here is the Lord, and we know Him as the Lord Jesus, standing right in the path with sword drawn. He is righteous in His justice! And the prophet who is supposed to see into the future can’t see the angel that’s in front of him. But his animal, his donkey, does. God opens the eyes of the donkey to see the angel of the LORD. So when the donkey sees the angel of the LORD with the sword, the donkey then says, “I’m not going down this path,” and he turns into a field. He’s getting away. And Balaam beats the donkey back onto the path. And now they come to a part of the path where there are two vineyards and there’s a wall. So it’s a very narrow part lined by walls. And so again, the donkey sees the angel of the LORD and the donkey says, “I probably can squeeze by, but just barely from getting out of the way of that sword.” He squeezes against one of the walls as he passes the angel of the LORD. And as he passes by, he crushes Balaam’s foot. Now Balaam is really angry! He beats him some more. So then a little further down the road, the angel of the LORD is on a part of the path where it’s impassable to the right or to the left. The donkey has no other recourse. The donkey lays down. And now Balaam is furious! He beats this donkey mercilessly.

The irony in this story is very rich. Balak, this king of Moab, is counting on Balaam to have power and to have influence to move God’s hand to curse a people. That’s what Balak is counting on. “You have the power, man! I’ve seen you do the power before. You have the ability to motivate gods to do things, and so we’re asking you to do it.” And here, how powerful is Balaam? He can’t even get his donkey to get up and walk. He can’t even get this little animal, an animal he has known, he can’t even get him to do what he wants him to do. It’s a great irony. God is revealing again who is in control.

As an aside, if you ever wonder if you have what it takes to be used of the Lord in significant service, remember this donkey. The donkey is a great encouragement to every one of us. “I don’t know if I have any gifts or any talents, any abilities to really ever be used of the Lord.” We’re still talking about this donkey 3500 years later, because God used this animal to do something really powerful to communicate His glory. And if God uses a donkey, again, He can use any one of us if we just simply submit to Him and say, “I’m a vessel. Use me however You will.” The truth is, the source of all spiritual power is the LORD. The source of spiritual power is not the LORD’s servant. Balak misunderstood that. Balaam misunderstood that. The donkey got it. At this point, the LORD let’s the donkey speak.

***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.”*

He’s embarrassed. Here are all these princes. They’re counting on him to do powerful things. He can’t even control his animal. And the donkey uses his reason.

***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.”*

At this point, the logic was overwhelming. “You’ve been a really great animal. You’ve been a great donkey.” It’s then that the Lord opens Balaam’s eyes to see the angel of the LORD. It’s convicting! Balaam bows down and falls on his face in the fear of the LORD. He realizes that the donkey saved his life. The Lord tells him as such.

***33*** *If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live.”*

“Balaam, the donkey’s life was never in jeopardy. The donkey wasn’t trying to preserve its life. He knew that I wasn’t after it. I was after you.” And so what does Balaam do? Notice this!

***34*** *Then Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, “I have sinned,*

At this, we as Evangelicals say, “Wonderful ! He’s saved. Let’s baptize him and let’s put him on the record of the church. He’s in the annual report as a converted soul. We did it! Let’s mark him down and let’s teach him about assurance of salvation.” But notice what he says afterwards.

*for I did not know that you stood in the road against me.*

What? Wait a minute! If a person says, “I’ve sinned,” what follows is not, “I didn’t know you were about to kill me.” What follows is, “I’ve sinned, and here’s how I sinned.” There’s no recognition of what he has done wrong. There’s only recognition of the consequence of the sin. That’s what he’s afraid of. That’s why he says, “I’ve sinned.” It’s not because he hated the sin. It’s because he was really, really scared of what would happen following his sin when God confronted him in his sin. This is not a humble confession of repentance. It’s a statement only of fear of the sword in the Lord’s hand. Balaam does not hate his sin. He is simply scared of the consequence. Here’s the truth. A confession of sin doesn’t always reflect a repentant heart. And that’s true of Balaam’s case. It doesn’t reflect a repentant heart. How do we know? Well first, Balaam would not also have said, “If this is evil in your sight.” Well of course it’s evil. The angel of the LORD is angry and has a sword in His hand. He is accusing God of somehow maybe misunderstanding him.

*Now therefore, if it is evil in your sight, I will turn back.”*

Of course it’s evil. He still doesn’t get it. He still doesn’t get that his heart is greedy for unrighteous gain and it’s not in alignment with worship. Balaam should be instantly turning back for home right now, the moment he sees the angel of the LORD, but he’s not. He says, “Is there maybe a way I can still keep going? If this is evil…”

We also know that Balaam is not repentant because of his continued actions. True repentance is a daily commitment. It is seen by daily actions and behaviors. Sadly, as this story unfolds, the Lord ultimately will take the life of Balaam because of his continued sin. He takes the life of the one who said, “I have sinned.” Because in saying that, Balaam doesn’t turn away from his sin. He is managing his sin and managing the consequences instead of killing it, putting it to death. So in seeking to keep his life, he loses it, when in fact, if he would have lost his life, lost his will, lost his way, given it over to God, he would have gained his life. That’s what the gospel is.

So God says, “Okay. Go with the men. But you can only say whatever I tell you.” This is God keeping an unbelieving, evil heart in check. He’s saying, “Okay. You can continue down this greedy path filled with avarice, filled with self-centeredness. But I’m going to keep you in reigns. I’m not going to let you do everything that your greedy heart would want to do. So you can only speak what I tell you.” Balaam then eventually meets Balak. Three times Balak asks Balaam to speak a curse upon the sons of Israel. But each time, Balaam is staying inside the lines. He’s not going to defy the One who appeared as an angel of the LORD with a sword in His hand. And he speaks only what God says. So the first time, Balak says, “Okay, here we are. Curse them.” And Balaam starts speaking and he only speaks a blessing. And Balak is upset at Balaam. In Numbers 23:11 he says

**Numbers 23:11** 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 then King Balak tries again. He takes Balaam to a different spot. “Now curse them.” And again, the oracle that is given to Balaam is one of blessing upon this people. And now Balak is even more frustrated in verse 25.

**Numbers 23:25** And Balak said to Balaam, “Do not curse them at all, and do not bless them at all.”

He says, “If you can’t say something bad, don’t say anything at all.” That’s his advice. He says, “If you can’t say a curse, then just don’t say anything. “No,” Balaam says. “I have to say whatever the Lord tells me to say. If it’s something good, I have to say it.” So then King Balak takes him to another spot. And again, Balaam is called upon to curse the people. And again, Balaam’s oracle is one of blessing upon this people. And now Balak is really angry with Balaam, and he strikes his hands together. In other words, he’s saying, “I’m almost through with you, buddy! Instead of giving you a reward, I’m about ready to take your life.” So it looks like Balaam didn’t earn the gold that was offered him. It seems like that’s the way the story ends until we get to chapter 25; until we discover the rest of the story.

In chapter 25, Balaam goes back to his place. He goes back home, away from Moab. And it says that the people of Israel began to intermingle with the daughters of Moab, and that the daughters of Moab, these Midianite women, invited them. “There’s a lot of fun food and drink over here. We’re going to throw a big party.” So they throw a big party. “And here’s our god, Baal. He’s a really fun god. So let’s have more alcohol and also start disrobing.” Part of their worship is part of this sexual immorality. And the men of Israel are just drawn into this; not just sexual immorality, but into false worship. And God responds by sending a plague upon this people. And think of this! 24,000 people died in this plague. And if it weren’t for Phineas, who takes a spear and drives it through an Israelite and the woman he’s with…While they’re in the act, he drives it through both of them because he is expressing the anger of the Lord. They’re in a tent right near the Tabernacle, where the presence of the Lord is, when Phineas comes in and says, “This is it!” It says that if Phineas had not done that, that plague would have continued and taken more than 24,000 lives. Think of that! How do you bury 24,000 people? It’s awful! But it tells us the response of God when we engage in false worship. Holy, holy, holy is the LORD God! What a story! We ask: What does Numbers 25 have to do with Balaam? Well Moses tells us. If you skip ahead to Numbers 31, Moses tells us Balaam’s part in this story. He says

**Numbers 31:16** Behold, these (Midianites), on Balaam’s advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the LORD.

So sometime before Balaam left to go back home, he said, “Okay. I couldn’t curse this people. I could only say what Yahweh told me to say. I still want the money, though. I think I have a way where there’s a win-win situation.” He says, “God is a God who is holy and He is righteous. If His people are drawn away from Him into false worship, that’s the number one thing God has told them not to do. And if some way you can find a way to get them drawn away into false worship, then that God will bring judgment upon this people. And then you might have a chance. And you know there are men, and men are men. They like alcohol and they like women. Maybe use some of that. Here’s some counsel on how you might go about doing that.” So it was on Balaam’s advice that this whole thing happened. He counseled them on how to corrupt the Israelites so that the Lord would express displeasure upon His own people. God’s displeasure of Balaam for his part in this was extreme. God judges the Midianites for their part in this. It tells us that the people of Israel killed Balaam with the sword. So Balaam dies. He is killed by the sword.

So what can we learn from Balaam? What can we learn from God’s treatment of Israel throughout this story? First, the New Testament really parks on a warning for us. There is something positive to say about God’s faithfulness to His blessing and to His promise. We’ll get to that at the end. But first, I want to focus on the emphasis of the New Testament. Balaam’s name appears three times. Here is an obscure person who is not a prophet of Israel, and not even really a prophet. He’s a false prophet, a soothsayer. Peter and Jude and John all mention him by name and talk about the incidents that we just discussed. In the way they discuss it, it’s always a warning to the church. It’s always a warning to God’s people to learn something from Balaam’s life. Don’t go down the path that Balaam went down, because if you did, there is just total ruin. Let’s take 2 Peter 2, first. There are three traps to avoid when we serve God, when we worship God, when we relate to God.

**1. The Way of Balaam: Being motivated in spiritual ministry for financial gain.**

In other words, saying our connection with God is somehow a way to gain material goods. So here’s what Peter says in 2 Peter 2. He’s speaking of false teachers.

**2 Peter 2:14-16** They have eyes full of adultery,insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, wholoved gain from wrongdoing, but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet’s madness.

He loved gain from wrongdoing. Balaam’s problem was that he loved money more than he loved God. He is not motivated in his life by the glory of God. He is interested in the gold of Balak rather than the grace that God would offer him if he simply humbled himself before Him. What a privilege Balaam experienced! He talked with the LORD God! The LORD spoke to Him. He encounters the pre-incarnate Christ. He speaks the truth of God. He speaks it well. He speaks it faithfully. He speaks it clearly. So much spiritual treasure is his for the taking right in front of him. There’s not many foreigners who get such close interaction with the living and true God, but Balaam did have that. Right in front of him was this rich treasure that would provide for him forever and ever, and yet he trades this spiritual treasure of God Himself for trinkets. These are trinkets that could be stolen and rust and ultimately he couldn’t keep. Here’s what Jesus says to us as we think about Balaam.

**Matthew 6:19-21** “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

In other words, what does your heart take joy in? Where are your affections? And again, it’s not just simply about, “I have to take some actions.” It’s a heart issue. Where is your heart? Does your heart treasure God or does it treasure the things of the earth? Don’t let your heart remain in a condition where you treasure these things that will be stolen from you, that will be destroyed, that will rust away, and ultimately you can’t keep. Don’t live that kind of life. Rather, allow your heart to attach itself to true treasure, to God Himself. When you attach it to God Himself, it’s not short-lived, but it’s eternal. Nothing can steal that treasure from you. Nothing will devalue it. But rather, it will be something that will enrich your life and that you will enjoy forever and ever and ever. Balaam’s heart never values the Lord more than he values money, and that’s his problem. Money constantly has a tug upon his heart.

One of the great problems of American Christianity is that we are wrapped up in our own wealth. Beloved, we must break free. We must break free of the love of money if we are to worship the LORD. Money is not evil in itself, but when our heart attaches love to money, it will destroy us and it will destroy our community. And it’s a particular problem of American Christianity when we live in a culture that is so wealthy.Jesus consistently warns His disciples against the love of money.

**Luke 16:13-14** “No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him.

He could have inserted Balaam’s name right here. You cannot serve God and money. It’s impossible! It’s not that you shouldn’t serve God and money, it’s that you can’t. It’s impossible for that to happen! The Pharisees ridiculed Him. “You are way off base. We’re okay with money. How dare you even suggest that we don’t love God more than money. You’re blind to the truth.”

**Luke 16:15** And he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”

I’m sure you can convince other people that you don’t love money more than you love God, but God knows your hearts. He sees the inner workings of your mind, of your attitudes, of your motivation. He sees all that. So let’s not just put on a show that we don’t love money. Let’s get to the root. And if we see thoughts and attitudes that betray to us, ‘I’m a person who loves money,’ then let’s go to Christ to change our hearts because the issue is a heart issue. Balaam’s life warns us that a love for money will keep us from loving God. A love for money compromises our worship one small step at a time. So that’s the way of Balaam.

**2. The Error of Balaam: Cooperating with the world while serving the true God.**

**Jude 1:11** Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam’s error and perished in Korah’s rebellion.

Again, this is talking about false teachers. Balaam did serve the true God, and yet all the while in serving the true God, he snuggled up to people who rejected the LORD and served other gods. He cared what these important princes thought about him. He wanted to be liked by them. He wanted to be proved. He thought he could walk with them and walk with God at the same time. Now as believers, we Christians are called to love unbelievers, but not yearn for their approval or favor.

If you are a parent or grandparent, one of the key lessons of discipleship we must teach our children and our grandchildren is to not care at all for the approval of this world, and to only be concerned about the approval of God. In fact, if you are mistreated, if you are persecuted, if you have people call you names simply because you love God, that’s actually a really good thing. Sons, daughters, we’re not expecting to be the most popular in this world. In fact, if you’re the most popular in this world, we’re a little concerned because we know what this world’s values are and you have to participate in those things if you’re going to be popular. What we care most is that your heart is whole before the Lord. And the Lord is going to stand by you. We will stand by you. Your church will stand by you. That’s who we are. That’s our identity. John would say

**1 John 2:15-17** Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

Balaam didn’t know his world was passing away. He thought those bags of money would last him forever. That’s the deception of all these worldly pursuits. James warns us not to be double-minded, a person who is unstable in all our ways. (James 1:8) And that’s exactly what Balaam is. On the one hand, I think he’s really sincere. “Okay, I want to tell you what God does.” I think in some points and some contexts, he has sincerity in his own soul. But then when he’s with the princes, he wants to do what his selfish heart wants to do. And a double-minded man is like that. He’s not completely hypocritical when he’s over here with the Lord and says, “Yeah, I know I’m really fooling all these people.” He himself is self-deceived. He thinks, “I really want to be here. I really want to honor the Lord.” But then in the next moment, he has double-mindedness. “I also really want to be here.” And there’s never a place of consecration, a place of devotion and commitment to say, “No, I’m going to reject this world in order to follow Jesus.” So here’s the application. Let’s pray to the Lord for a united heart. This is a very grave danger for every one of us, as is the love of money, the desire for the approval of men. Let’s pray to the Lord for a united heart. I love Psalm 86!

**Psalm 86:11-12** Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name. I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever.

“God, it has to be a miracle because my heart is divided by nature. Unite it so that it’s whole.”

**3. The Teaching of Balaam: Achieving success by influencing others to sin.**

In Revelation 2 we read the Spirit of God speaking to this church at Pergamum.

**Revelation 2:14-15** But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

He says, “You’ve been a great church in a lot of ways, but here’s a few things I have against you.” It’s not that the whole church held to the teaching of Balaam. It’s just that some people in the church held to the teaching of Balaam and the church wasn’t confronting them. The church wasn’t correcting them. And what is the teaching of Balaam? He taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel. In some way, it’s teaching that puts a stumbling block, that puts a temptation before other people so that other people enter into sin, enter into disobedience. And Balaam did that so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality, so that he could get his money. So the teaching of Balaam is achieving success by influencing others to sin.

We all have personal goals, desires, hopes, dreams. What cost will we make other people pay in order for us to pursue those dreams and those hopes? That’s the question. The teaching of Balaam says, “Don’t even consider that. Everyone is responsible for their own life, so you can’t even consider how your actions and how your pursuits are affecting them.” That’s the teaching of Balaam. That’s what the Spirit of Jesus says. “I’m going to take away your candlestick unless you get this right. You better turn from it as a church. Don’t let that become part of the culture of your church. If everybody says, ‘it’s every man for himself,’ and if other people are tempted by sin because of my actions or my beliefs, well, it’s on them. That’s their responsibility.” That’s the teaching of Balaam.

This teaching says that we can walk in the way of the world and in the way of God at the same time. It says that we can be very much like the world and not consider the stumbling blocks we are placing in the path of other brothers and sisters, especially little ones, those who are young in faith. Balaam’s attitude is, “In order to get what I want, I may need to influence other people to sin, and that’s okay because I’m not responsible for them.” If we set our heart on sinful pursuits, we cannot avoid enticing others to sin. The person who tempts others to sin rarely sees it that way. If you say, “You’re putting a stumbling block on others. You’re tempting them to sin,” they say, “Oh no I’m not! How dare you!” God is not blind to this and that’s why He sees this in Balaam and He remarks about it in Revelation chapter 2.

Here’s what Jesus said to His disciples. And again, it’s a warning to us. Let’s be careful with the way we live, the way we think, the way we believe. It all has an impact on others that God will hold us responsible for; every one of us, teachers especially, but every one of us. And here’s what Jesus says in Luke 17.

**Luke 17:1** And he said to his disciples, “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!

There’s no culture, no environment where we can keep people from being tempted. But He says it’s a terrible thing to be the person who delivers temptation on the doorstep of another. It’s a terrible thing! How terrible is it? Jesus says

**Luke 17:2** It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin.

A millstone is a huge rock. It would be better for that to be hung around someone’s neck and he were to be thrown in the deep, deep sea, than to be the person who causes one of these little ones to sin. That’s how terrible this problem is in the sight of God! So we ask ourselves, am I influencing anyone to sin by my own selfish pursuits?Balaam is pretty direct about persuading the Midianites to entice the Israelites into false worship. But even then, the tempter doesn’t see himself as a tempter. So what are some applications?

Well, there is the angry dad who gets frustrated and expresses his anger with loud words, cursing, hurtful words. And little ears hear those words. Does that dad know that he is putting a stumbling block before his children to learn how to respond to frustrations in their life? He probably doesn’t even think about it. He probably thinks, “Well, I feel bad. I shouldn’t have said those words.” But that dad should fall before the Father and say, “God, forgive me and change my heart. I don’t want to put one more temptation before my sons or my daughters. It would be better for me to have a millstone tied around my neck and thrown into the sea than that I would cause one of these little ones to stumble.”

The boyfriend does not see how he is enticing his girlfriend to sin when he pursues sexual activity with her. He just says, “We kind of both messed up.” Woe to that one who is enticing another to enter into a sinful act! Woe to the one!

The college buddy doesn’t see how he is enticing his friends when he invites them to a party to go drinking. “Hey, we’re all a bunch of buddies. We’re all responsible. We’re all doing this together.” Woe to the one! If you are at a party and perhaps you don’t get drunk but your buddy does, woe to you, the Scripture would say. It’s the teaching of Balaam.

The gossip doesn’t see how her unloving words about others entice her friends to sin when she shares some juicy story or some evil report. She doesn’t even see it. She doesn’t think it. Our sin is rarely isolated to ourselves. We almost always damage other people’s souls when we sin, and God will hold us accountable for that! Let’s remember that. That’s the teaching of Balaam. It’s the warning. So let’s review the warnings from Balaam.

1. A love for money will destroy our love for the LORD. We have to choose between the two.

2. Cozying up to the world will destroy our love for the LORD. We must choose between the two.

3. Influencing others to sin invites God’s judgment upon our lives.

Now, we take a step back and we think of the opportunity Balaam squandered.He talked with the Lord. He was warned directly by the Lord. He saw firsthand the Lord’s determination to bless His people. Balaam never asked the question, “How can I be loved by this God who, once He promises blessing, He never ever, ever retracts from that promise? I want to be connected to a God like that and I want to do everything I can to receive that irrevocable promise of God for blessing. That’s what I want.” Balaam never asked that question. And yet the story, I think the main part of the story, the central idea really is to demonstrate that when God promises to bless a people, regardless of how unfaithful they are, He will fulfill His kind intention to bring blessing. The Lord is absolutely determined to bless the people whom He chooses to bless. We would think that Balaam would have an interest in such eternal blessing. He surely has an interest in gold. But he’s not. His love for temporal trinkets blinded him to the true treasure, and so his heart remained captive to idolatry.

So, how about you? We need to be connected to this God who blesses and never retracts from that blessing regardless of our weaknesses, regardless of our failings. We need to be connected to Him and He invites us to be connected to Him by believing in His Son, Jesus. I close with a word from Isaiah. I urge us all to consider, what application would I make to my own life as I listen to this command for me? And here’s what Isaiah says.

**Isaiah 55:6-7** “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

God was so close to Balaam for this time. Let the wicked forsake his way. “I’m done going the way of the Moabites. I don’t have any interest in their bags of gold.” God is a God who will abundantly pardon. And that, my friends, is very, very good news!