

THE STORY OF BALAAM, HIS DONKEY, HIS TWO ENCOUNTERS WITH GOD, AND THEIR EFFECT UPON HIM NUMBERS 22:15–41

Introduction

There is an unseen warfare going on behind the events of world history. This warfare is conducted by the evil spirits of darkness, evil spirits who serve under a supreme power that is identified in the Holy Scripture as Satan or the devil. In deep malice and wrath against God, these evil forces try their best, when possible, to frustrate the plan of God for this world. Evil spirits seek to cut the heart of God because of God's judgment against their arrogance and rejection of Him. The way they seek to hurt God is by taking over the normal desires and the obsessive passions of men, using them to destroy people. They use the passions that enslave people, passions such as...

- greed
- cravings
- immorality
- drugs
- vulgarity
- abuse
- alcohol
- profanity
- killing
- gluttony
- pornography
- lust

If the curtain were rolled back between earth and heaven, man would easily see what lies behind all the sin and evil, all the conflicts and struggles of this world. He would clearly see a horde of evil spirits seeking to cut the heart of God by deceiving people, by turning them away from God (see outline and notes, Luke 8:26-39). One of the ways used by these evil spirits is the world of the occult, the world of the false prophet, the diviner, the sorcerer, the psychic, the palm-reader, the fortune-teller, the astrologer and a host of others. The leaders of the occult advertise and cry out for the attention of people, claiming that they know the future, can meet needs, and can bring blessings into the lives of people. Some even go so far as to claim that they can control and alter the future, that they can bring blessings upon those whom they bless and curses upon those whom they curse. Under the power of darkness and spiritual wickedness in high places, they mislead people and cause them to turn away from the only living and true God, the Lord God Himself (Jehovah, Yahweh). The world of the occult is a world controlled by evil spirits who are set upon destroying the lives of people and cutting the heart of God. (See outline and notes, Acts 16:16-17; Rev 12:3-4; 12:9.)

Eph 6:12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Remember, Israel is camped in the plains of Moab by the Jordan River across from the great city of Jericho. The present Scripture is an event that takes place totally unknown to the Israelites. It is a picture of the unseen, unknown attempts by the powers of darkness

and spiritual wickedness in high places — an attempt to destroy the people of God in order to break the heart of God. Keep in mind that Israel is totally unaware of what is happening. But not God. God knows, and God protects His people. He will not allow any person to touch His people, to call a curse of judgment and destruction down upon them. Judgment and destruction are in His hands and no one else's. To curse His people with judgment and destruction will never happen, never be allowed. This is the story of this Scripture: *The Story of Balaam, His Donkey, and His Three Encounters with God: A Picture of the Unseen, Unknown Attempts by the Powers of Darkness to Defeat God's People*, Numbers 22:1-41

- I. The background to the encounters with God: a false belief in divination (vv. 1-6).
- II. The 1st encounter of Balaam with God: a man who earned money dishonestly (2 Pet 2:15) (vv. 7-14).
- III. The 2nd encounter of Balaam with God: a man who would do anything for money (Jude 11) (vv. 15-21).
- IV. The 3rd encounter of Balaam with God (the story of the donkey): the anger of God over greed and the signs of His anger (vv. 22-35).
- V. The effect of the encounters and warnings upon Balaam (vv. 36-41).

I. *Numbers 22:15–21 Balaam's Second Encounter with God*

The second encounter of Balaam with God was stunning and revealing: it revealed a double-minded, hypocritical and greedy heart. This encounter with God exposed a man who would do anything for money.

Jude 11 Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error; they have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion.

1. The king was not going to give up, for he was desperate. He tried a more urgent request with Balaam: he sent other officials, a larger number and more distinguished. Note that he also sent a far more appealing offer:
 - ⇒ The king would pay him well, in essence, pay Balaam whatever he desired.
 - ⇒ The king would do anything, bestow whatever honour Balaam desired.
 - ⇒ The king was desperate: he begged Balaam to come and put a curse on Israel (v. 17). Note how the king appealed to the greed and covetousness of the human heart. He offered this false prophet, this diviner, this sorcerer, this psychic anything he wanted — any amount of money and any honour. He appealed to his greed, his pride and his ambition. The king was desperate: this diviner must come and put a curse on God's people so that he could defeat them and drive them out of his country (see v. 6).
2. The response of Balaam revealed a spirit that was totally enslaved by greed (vv. 18-19). Note how Balaam's actions were for appearance only. He only seemed to be resisting the summons and offer of the king.

- a. Balaam declared that nothing could change his mind, not to go against God's will. He would not even go against God's will for a palace filled with silver and gold (v. 18). Remember, God had already revealed His will: the false prophet was not to go (v. 12). He knew exactly what God wanted him to do: he was not to curse Israel. They were God's people, followers of the only living and true God. Therefore, there was no chance that God was going to curse His people nor allow anyone else to put a true curse upon them. No one would ever be allowed to defeat His people nor to curse His people to the judgment of death. Only the Lord God Himself (Jehovah, Yahweh) had the power to curse and judge people to death. No one else had this power. Consequently, there was no chance that God was going to judge His own people, those who sought to follow after Him. Moreover, there was no chance that He was going to allow Balaam or anyone else to curse His dear people. All this Balaam already knew. God had revealed it to him, forbidding him from going and attempting to curse God's people. But note how wavering, double-minded and hypocritical Balaam was.
 - b. He told the officials to stay and spend the night while he sought God, just in case God would give him another message and allow him to go (v. 19). This shows a strong, strong urge and intention to accept the offer. This was a terrible reflection upon God, as though God were double-minded and would change His mind, allowing him to go and put a curse upon the people of God. The heart and mind of this man were so corrupt and twisted that he played the role of a hypocrite, of a double-minded man himself. Deceiving and misleading the officials were nothing to him. He would not go against God's will even for a palace filled with silver and gold, but he would take the night to seek God just in case God would let him go. He was play-acting with the name of God, preying upon the needs, the hopes and the dreams of people — all for money and profit. Obviously to him, God was little higher than man himself who wavered back and forth, changing his mind day by day. Simply stated, he already knew God's will. He knew that he was not to go, for God had already told him that he was not to go nor to put a curse upon the precious people of God.
3. Note the second encounter with God: God gave Balaam over to his greed, gave him up to the lusts of his own heart (Rom 1:28-32). Balaam's heart was set on going. He lusted to go, craved after the wealth and honours offered by the king. The lust and greed had enslaved his heart. His mind had already made the decision: he was going. But note what happened when he got alone that night: God came to Balaam and gave him a severe warning: "Since these men had come to summon him — since he had determined to go with them — he could go. But he had better do only what God told him" (v. 20). The decision to rebel against God by going was made by Balaam. The permission to allow Balaam to follow through was given by God. Balaam was permitted to go, but he was warned and warned severely: he must do only what God told him to do.

4. The response of Balaam to the confrontation with God was just what would be expected from a greedy heart: he got up in the morning and went with the officials. He still had the freedom to obey God, the ability to choose not to go, not to put a curse upon God's people. But the choice was made, driven by the consuming passion of greed, the lust after money and honour.

Thought 1. Greed and covetousness are wrong; they are sin before God and man. A covetous, greedy person violates the very commandment of God Himself. Moreover, the covetous, greedy person causes suffering by not sharing and distributing to those who are in need. And sometimes, by stealing from the needy and poor, covetousness and greed consume a person, eating away at his spirit and life. A greedy, covetous person actually falls into many foolish and hurtful passions, doing many foolish and hurtful things. Greed and covetousness actually plunge men into destruction and doom.

Mat 27:5 So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

Luke 12:15 Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

Col 3:5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

1 Tim 6:9-10 People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

James 5:3 Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days.

Jas 5:4 Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.

Exo 20:17 You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

Prov 15:27 A greedy man brings trouble to his family, but he who hates bribes will live.

Prov 16:8 Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice.

Prov 21:6 A fortune made by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapour and a deadly snare.

Prov 22:16 He who oppresses the poor to increase his wealth and he who gives gifts to the rich — both come to poverty.

Eccl 5:10 Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless.

Jer 17:11 Like a partridge that hatches eggs it did not lay is the man who gains riches by unjust means. When his life is half gone, they will desert him, and in the end he will prove to be a fool.

Jer 22:13 Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his countrymen work for nothing, not paying them for their labour.

Ezek 33:31 My people come to you [the prophet, the preacher], as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain.

Micah 2:2 They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellow man of his inheritance.

Hab 2:9-10 “Woe to him who builds his realm by unjust gain to set his nest on high, to escape the clutches of ruin! You have plotted the ruin of many peoples, shaming your own house and forfeiting your life.”

II. *Numbers 22:22–35 Balaam’s Third Encounter with God*

The third encounter of Balaam with God aroused the anger of God. This is the story of Balaam and the donkey, a story that reveals the anger of God over greed. Simply stated, God used the donkey as a sign of His anger against the greed of this false prophet. God used the donkey as a warning of judgment if the false prophet did not do exactly what God instructed. This is a dramatic lesson that shows God’s anger and displeasure with the world of the occult. God stands opposed to any false prophet, diviner, sorcerer, psychic, palm-reader, fortune-teller or astrologer. God is angry with any person who uses the fears and hopes of people to gain profit or money. The leaders of the occult world are stumbling blocks to people: they lead people into a false belief, away from the only living and true God (Jehovah, Yahweh). But even more terrible than this, they doom people to an eternity of separation from God in the judgment to come. This is the reason God is angry with the world of the occult, the reason He is going to severely judge the world of the occult. This was certainly part of the reason God spoke through the donkey to Balaam. In this dramatic event of the donkey speaking, God was warning Balaam, giving him a severe warning: he must do exactly what God says. This dramatic experience emphasized the point to Balaam, gave him an experience that he could not ignore. Note exactly what Scripture says: God’s anger was aroused because Balaam went (v. 22). Balaam had known exactly what God’s will was; nevertheless, he ignored God and went anyway. But this one thing God determined: this false prophet was not going to curse the dear people of God.

1. In anger, the angel of the Lord stood in the road to block Balaam’s way (vv. 22-23). This blind, false prophet was so blinded by his covetousness and greed that he could not see the angel of the Lord. But the donkey saw the angel standing with a drawn sword in the middle of the road. Frightened, the donkey turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat the donkey to get her back on the road.

2. But again, the angel of the Lord blocked the path, a narrow path with walls on both sides (vv. 24-25). The result was the same: the donkey saw the angel with his sword drawn and tried to squeeze by, crushing Balaam's foot against one of the walls. Balaam again beat the animal.
3. The angel of the Lord then moved ahead to a place so narrow that the donkey simply could not get by (vv. 26-27). This time the donkey saw the angel of the Lord and simply lay down under Balaam. In anger, Balaam struck the donkey, beating her with his staff.
4. Then it was that the drama began: in dramatic fashion God opened the donkey's mouth. The animal miraculously, shockingly spoke to Balaam (see 2 Pet 2:16). The reader must keep this fact in mind: the donkey did not speak by its own power; it spoke by the power of God. This was a miracle, a miracle brought about by the hand of God Himself. Note what the donkey did:
 - a. The donkey did what any living creature would do if it could speak: it complained of Balaam's cruelty (v. 28).
 - b. Balaam flew into a fit of rage, stating that he wished he had a sword to kill the animal. The animal had made a fool out of him (v. 29).
 - c. But note how the donkey miraculously reasoned with Balaam (v. 30). She argued that she was Balaam's property and that she had always served Balaam well. Moreover, she had never behaved like this before (v. 30).
 - d. Balaam, obviously stunned and amazed at the dumb animal speaking to him, could only agree.
5. At this point, the Lord opened Balaam's eyes (vv. 31-35).
 - a. Balaam immediately saw the angel of the Lord standing with his sword drawn. The drawn sword was a symbol of God's anger, a strong warning to Balaam. Stricken with fear, he fell face down on the ground.
 - b. The angel of the Lord then confronted this obstinate, hard-hearted false prophet who was so consumed with greed (vv. 32-33). The Lord immediately rebuked him for mistreating an animal. Then it happened: God condemned him because of his reckless, stubborn heart, because of his resistance to God. Balaam had chosen to follow the sinful way of greed, the stubborn, reckless way that stands in opposition to God. God warned Balaam in no uncertain terms: God would have taken his life by now because of his stubborn, disobedient resistance if the donkey had not stopped (v. 33).
 - c. Balaam confessed his sin and offered to return (v. 34). But note: he did not repent. This was only a partial confession, for true confession involves repentance. Repentance is the turning back to God, obeying God totally, fully and completely — doing exactly what God commands. If Balaam had been sincere, he would have truly repented, returned home and given his life to God, becoming a follower of the only living and true God. But this Balaam did not do. With one eye on the sword in

the hand of the angel and with a heart filled with greed, he half-heartedly said that he would return if he had displeased the Lord. Of this, there was no question. The Lord had already told him never to leave to go to king Balak. Balaam had disobeyed the instructions of the Lord, and he was continuing to disobey them: all because his heart was full of greed and covetousness.

- d. Note the response of the angel of the Lord: he gave Balaam over to his greed (Rom 1:28-32). He could go, but he must speak only what God told him (v. 35).

Thought 1. There are two clear lessons for us in this point:

- (1) God had the power to speak through the donkey of Balaam. God has the power to perform miracles in order to achieve His purposes upon this earth. One of His purposes is the same purpose that He was working out through Balaam: the purpose of protecting His dear people. God has the power to protect His precious people and protect them He will. God's power is unlimited, and He will use whatever amount of power is needed to protect and take care of His dear people.

Mat 19:26 *Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."*

Luke 1:37 *"For nothing is impossible with God."*

Rom 16:25 *Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past.*

Eph 3:20 *Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.*

Phil 1:6 *Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

Phil 3:20-21 *But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.*

2 Tim 4:18 *The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

Heb 13:6 *So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"*

Jude 1:24 *To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy.*

2 Sam 22:2 *He said: "The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer."*

Job 42:2 *"I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted."*

Psa 40:17 *Yet I am poor and needy; may the LORD think of me. You are my help and my deliverer: O my God, do not delay.*

Psa 115:3 *Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.*

Isa 41:10 *So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*

Isa 43:13 *Yes, and from ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it?"*

Jer 1:8 *"Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD.*

(2) The heart of Balaam was reckless, stubborn and resistant to God. He was a hard-hearted person whose mind was set on the things of this world, its money and possessions. He was possessed by greed and covetousness. As a result, his heart was hard and stubborn against God. Scripture declares in no uncertain terms: a stubborn, hard heart is condemned by God. A hard-hearted, stubborn person will face the judgment of God and be eternally separated from God — tragically, all because the person resists the salvation of God provided through Christ Jesus. Hardness of heart condemns a person.

Rom 2:5 *But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.*

Heb 3:13 *But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*

1 Sam 15:23 *"For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king."*

Prov 28:14 *Blessed is the man who always fears the LORD, but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble.*

Prov 29:1 *A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed — without remedy.*

Mal 2:2 *"If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honour my name," says the Lord Almighty, "I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honour me."*

III. Numbers 22:36–41 The Effect of the Encounters with God

The effect of God's encounters and warnings upon Balaam was a lesson that was going to be heeded. Remember what God had just told Balaam along the journey: He had considered striking Balaam dead (v. 33). This threat and the experience with the donkey had gotten across to Balaam. Balaam was to be an instrument, a mouth-piece for God

to share some very special messages with the world. Balaam did not yet know this, but he soon would. This false prophet was ready to share with the king only what God Himself revealed.

1. Note the excitement and expectation of king Balak at the coming of Balaam (vv. 36-37). He travelled all the way to the border to meet Balaam. After their greetings, the king expressed disappointment in Balaam's refusal of his first request. He could not understand the refusal in light of the rich rewards he had so willingly offered Balaam.
2. Note the effect of Balaam's encounters with the Lord, the effect of God's warnings to him (v. 38). Balaam replied to the king that he had now come despite his earlier reluctance. But Balaam added that he still could speak only the message that God gave him. No doubt, the image of the drawn sword in the hand of the angel dominated the thoughts of Balaam. Stricken with the fear of the angel and the threat of God, Balaam was determined to share only the message God wanted shared.
3. Note how the king celebrated Balaam's coming (vv. 39-41). The king offered pagan sacrifices of sheep and goats to his "gods." Note that Balaam participated with Balak, eating the meat that was sacrificed. The king then took Balaam up to Bamoth Baal, that is, some hill or high place where Baal was worshipped. He did this so that they could scan the camp of Israel together.

Thought 1. God is sovereign, in total control of the universe and of all that happens within the universe. This does not mean that God overrides the free will of people; rather it means that God works all things out for good...

- in order to achieve His eternal purpose
 - in order to look after His people and conform them to the image of His dear Son
- God takes all the events throughout the universe, twisting and turning and working them out for the good of those who love Him, those who have been called according to His eternal purpose. This is exactly what God was doing with Balaam: twisting and turning and using the experiences of Balaam to protect His dear people. Moreover, He was going to use Balaam to proclaim some glorious messages to the world. God is God; that is, He is Sovereign, Almighty, able to do exactly what He wills. Therefore, God overrode Balaam's greed and covetousness, determining to use him to bless God's dear people instead of cursing them.

The point to see is this: God is sovereign, in control of all things. Therefore, God works all things out for the good of His dear people, for the good of all those who love Him and are called by Him.

Rom 8:28 *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

2 Cor 4:17 *For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.*

2 Cor 12:9 *But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.*

1 Pet 4:12-13 *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*

Psa 30:5 *For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favour lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.*

Psa 34:19 *A righteous man may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all.*

Psa 41:3 *The LORD will sustain him on his sickbed and restore him from his bed of illness.*

Psa 43:2 *You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?*

Psa 50:15 *And call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honour me.*

Psa 138:7 *Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes, with your right hand you save me. ■*