

The Error Of Balaam

Introduction. Man is unique among all of God's creation in that only he has the ability to meditate upon the past. We can meditate not only on our own personal history but also that of other people we know and with whom we have been acquainted. If that were not enough, man has the propensity to record events as he lives them thus leaving with us a record of history, in many cases spanning centuries. What benefit is this wonderful ability of man if it is not to learn from the experience? In fact, sacred record declares it to be so (1 Corinthians 10:11).

I. *The Historical Background*

- A. Balaam, the son of Beor, was a magician who lived near the Euphrates River. According to heathen views, a magician had absolute and irresistible power with the gods.
 1. The scriptures designate him with the Hebrew word *kosem*, which is the distinctive term for heathen soothsayers in opposition to the prophets of the Lord.
 2. Power was inherent in him or in the incantations which he used. Herein lay the fundamental difference between heathenism and the Old Testament, between magic and miracles. In the former it was all of man, in the latter it was shown to be all of God.
- B. God sent His angel with a very stern warning to Balaam not to speak what Balak wanted him to say but only the true message of God, a pronouncement of blessing on the Israelites. The encounter with the prophet on the road was intended as a frightening reminder that Balaam was never to speak any other message than that which God was about to reveal to him in the presence of the Moabites and the Midianites. Because of his corrupt motive in going to Balak afterward, despite his earlier refusal to come to Balak at all (Numbers 22:13), Balaam was guilty of wanting to comply with the king's request rather than God's desire, just for the sake of the earthly riches and honor the wicked king had promised him as a bribe to disobey God.
- C. The Lord gave Balaam permission to go down to Moab, on the condition that he would faithfully repeat the true message of God in the presence of Balak and the Moabites. However, because of the struggle between duty and greed within Balaam as he responded to the king's invitation, God had to remind him very sternly that his failure to carry out his task from God with complete faithfulness would result in his instant death. Hence God used the donkey as His mouthpiece to rebuke the stubborn prophet and warn him of his mortal danger.
- D. Balak, the king of Moab, had sent for Balaam that he might work his magic to defeat the power of God. However, Balaam, instead of cursing

Israel, blessed them in a series of seven prophetic sayings which detailed many aspects of their history as a nation.

1. First prophecy (23:1-12).
 2. Second prophecy (23:13-26).
 3. Third prophecy (23:27-24:14).
 4. Fourth prophecy (24:15-19).
 5. Fifth prophecy (24:20).
 6. Sixth prophecy (24:21-22).
 7. Seventh prophecy (24:23-25).
- E. Although it may appear that Balaam was a prophet of the Lord, his conduct throughout this whole turn of events is consistently heathen. As God had raised up Pharaoh to be the instrument of destruction to the gods of Egypt, so Balaam was a chosen instrument of God (Romans 9:17). It is in this manner that we regard God's meeting Balaam, and His speaking both to him and through him.

II. ***The Error Of Balaam***

- A. Balaam hesitated in the presence of evil.
1. A curse had been pronounced against Moab (Numbers 21:29).
 - a) Yet, Balaam received the messengers and God declared that his way was "perverse" (Numbers 22:7-8, 32).
 - b) Balaam's story might have been different had he not been so hospitable with evil. God permitted him to go to Balak to use him for His purposes.
 2. Lot is another example.
 - a) He did not see the danger of pitching his tent toward Sodom (Genesis 13:12).
 - b) He paid severely for his mistake (Genesis 19:12-13, 23-26).
 3. We must fear and hate evil rather than court it (Proverbs 6:27; Romans 12:9; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18).
- B. Balaam loved the wages of unrighteousness.
1. Balaam's hire by the elders of Midian and Moab was called by Peter "the wages of unrighteousness" (Numbers 22:7, 15-17; 2 Peter 2:15-16).
 2. The figure of Balaam stands alone in the history of the Old Testament.
 - a) The only counterpart to him is Judas (Matthew 26:14-16).
 - b) Both stood in a decisive moment in their lives and chose the wrong path.
 3. With no spiritual, only a heathen acknowledgment of God, covetousness and ambition were Balaam's motives (Jude 11). Covetousness is condemned (Luke 12:15; Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5).

- C. Balaam tried to justify his self-will.
1. God spoke but Balaam wanted "more" (Numbers 22:19).
 2. How many times do we or people we know play the part of Balaam by not being content with what God's word says but want another revelation?
 - a) God has revealed His will about forgiveness of sins but people want more (Acts 2:38; 22:16).
 - b) God has revealed His will about music in worship but people want more (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).
 - c) God has revealed His will about divorce and remarriage but some want more (Matthew 19:9; Romans 7:2-3).
 3. Obedience requires submitting to the will and word of God from the heart (Matthew 7:24-27; Romans 6:17).
- D. Balaam did not heed the warning of God.
1. You would think that a man who had been so clearly instructed as Balaam would follow God's will closely, especially after being warned in such a dramatic way, but not so with Balaam (Numbers 22:22-34).
 2. In much the same way, God has clearly given us warnings today.
 - a) God has warned us about obeying the gospel (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9).
 - b) God has warned us about being unfaithful and unfruitful (Matthew 25:24-30).
 3. Considering Balaam to be so foolish, will we make the same mistakes? Will we listen to the warnings?
- E. Balaam worked diligently and willfully at sin.
1. Three times in three different places, Balaam told Balak to offer sacrifice to God in an effort to curse Israel (Numbers 23:1, 14, 29).
 - a) A principle of heathenism stated that national deities might be induced to transfer their blessing and protection from one nation to another.
 - b) If Balaam could have turned God away from His purpose, he would have reached his goal and become by far the most powerful magician in the world.
 2. Many pursue a life of rebellion against God.
 - a) The Israelites rebelled against God at Kadesh-barnea (Deuteronomy 1:26-27).
 - b) Saul rebelled against God in the matter of the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15:9).
 3. Yet, the way of rebellion is the way of condemnation (2 Thessalonians 2:8-12). Let us cleanse ourselves from unrighteousness and pursue holiness (2 Corinthians 7:1).

- F. Balaam taught others to sin.
1. Balaam brought evil upon himself.
 - a) He did not obtain the reward he desired (Numbers 24:10-11).
 - b) He lost his own life (Numbers 31:8).
 2. Tragically, he brought evil upon others (Numbers 31:16; Revelation 2:14).
 - a) Balaam tried to turn God away from His people and failed, but he was successful in turning the people away from God!
 - (1) Had Balaam stopped with his visions from God, he would have been safe, but he wanted the money and honor that Balak promised.
 - (2) He told the king how to defeat Israel.
 - (a) His plan was simple: invite the Jews to share in the heathen sacrificial feasts and corrupt them with idolatry and lust.
 - (b) If Satan cannot overcome God's people as a lion (1 Peter 5:8), then he comes as a serpent.
 - b) In the judgment which ensued, 24,000 Israelites perished.
 - (1) The plague was not abated until Phinehas represented Israel before God and demonstrated that they abhorred idolatry and the sins connected with it.
 - (2) When Christians become friendly with their spiritual enemies, we need more people like Phinehas who will take a stand for separation and holiness.
 3. We need to be very careful lest in our teaching or conduct we become guilty of casting a stumbling block before others (Luke 17:1-2).

Conclusion. We need to learn from Balaam's mistakes (Deuteronomy 23:4-5; Joshua 24:9-10; Nehemiah 13:2; Micah 6:5; cf. Romans 15:4). God requires us to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly (Micah 6:8). Let us turn from evil, heed the example of Balaam and heed the warning of God.