

Lesson 7 | October 13, 2024

Balaam Cannot Curse Israel

Study Text: Numbers 22:1–6; 23:1 through 24:13

Central Truth: We should speak life-giving words and seek to bless the people of God.

Key Verse: Numbers 23:19

God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good? (KJV)

God is not a man, so he does not lie. He is not human, so he does not change his mind. Has he ever spoken and failed to act? Has he ever promised and not carried it through? (NLT)

Learning Objectives

- Students will recognize that God will accomplish His purposes despite any opposition.
- Students will experience the peace of God's protection amid all threats, both known and unknown.
- Students will choose to submit their lives to Jesus, receiving His blessings and passing them on to others.

Introducing the Lesson

Say: It's one thing to defend yourself against a threat you saw coming. But how are you supposed to protect yourself when you have no idea an attack is about to happen? The story of Balaam (*BAY-luhm*) in the Book of Numbers shows us how God supernaturally protected Israel—even when they were completely unaware of the plot against them.

Discussion Starter—Where Were You?

Say: What events have happened in your lifetime that were so significant, you remember where you were when you heard about them? (*Examples: the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the assassination of JFK, the Challenger explosion, the September 11 attacks*)

Say: Unexpected events like these are vividly written in our memories. In Numbers 23, the people of Israel had no idea that an enemy attack was about to happen. But God stepped in to protect them for His own glory.

Numbers 21 through Deuteronomy 34 records how the people of Israel gathered in the Plains of Moab, preparing for their conquest of the Promised Land. Moab was located just east of Canaan, with the Dead Sea separating them. Balak, the king of Moab, knew his nation was no match for the military power of Israel, so he came up with a different

kind of battle plan. He enlisted Balaam—a man believed to possess great spiritual authority—to curse Israel. But what was intended to harm Israel opened the door for God to bless them instead.

Part 1—Balaam Speaks Blessing, Not Cursing An Enemy's Plan

Numbers 22:1–8

Say: For Israel, entering the Promised Land meant defeating all the other nations that lived there. But first, they needed to get to the border of Canaan. The king of the Edomites to the south refused to allow them to pass (Numbers 20:14–21). Then the king of Arad to the southwest and the king of the Amorites to the northeast denied entry as well, and both of their armies were destroyed by the Israelites (21:1–3, 21–24). The Moabites lived right between these defeated nations, and they fully understood the Israelite threat. So King Balak (*BAY-lak*) came up with a plan to resist them. He would seek help from a higher power.

In the forty years since Israel had first tried to enter the Promised Land, a great deal had changed. The Israelites no longer saw themselves as grasshoppers facing mighty giants (Numbers 13:33). Instead, the nations that Israel once feared were now terrified of them—and their God. Realizing there was a supernatural source behind Israel's power, the Moabite king, Balak, decided to engage in a spiritual battle.

Balak sent elders from Moab and their allies the Midianites on a four-hundred-mile journey to Pethor (*PEE-thohr*), likely near the border of modern-day Turkey and Syria (22:5). This region, which was famous for idolatry, was the home of Balaam, a well-known spiritualist of the time. The power to invoke blessings and curses was prized in the ancient world, and few individuals in the ancient Near East could likely rival Balaam's reputation. He was viewed as someone who could communicate with and manipulate a variety of gods. He was the perfect choice for Balak's simple plan: For a vast sum of money, Balaam would travel to Moab and curse the Israelites. Balak was confident that curses from Balaam would so weaken the Israelite army that the Moabites could easily defeat them (verse 6).

Verse 8 seems to indicate that one of the gods Balaam would consult was not just a god but *the* God—Yahweh, the Lord. For Balak's plan to work, Balaam would try to coerce God to curse His own people. The rest of chapter 22 records Balaam's amazing encounters with God, a talking donkey, and the angel of the Lord until finally, he was standing before Balak.

Spiritual power is a real thing in the world (Ephesians 6:12). There are forces working to kill, steal, and destroy (John 10:10), but Balaam's story reminds us that their power is not supreme. The one true God is in control of your life and well-being.

Discuss

- In what ways do you believe spiritual forces are at work today?
- How should believers react when they are under spiritual attack?

Resource Packet Item 1: God Is for Us

When it comes to spiritual battles, the Bible is clear that God is for His people. Students will observe ways God is for them so they can be strong and courageous as they live for Him. This handout could be sent home with students if there is not time in class for the activity.

A Divine Reversal

Numbers 23:1–12

Say: Balak couldn't have been more surprised or disappointed when he heard Balaam's message. He had hoped that Balaam could manipulate spiritual forces to weaken Israel, but he discovered the one true God cannot be manipulated. Instead of turning God into his pawn, Balaam soon became an instrument of God's blessing.

Balak and the Moabites must have been anxiously waiting for their emissaries to return with Balaam. All their hopes rested on the services of this hired "holy man." Even if the journey moved at a brisk pace, an eight-hundred-mile round trip would have taken at least two months at that time. Finally, Balaam arrived. After he and Balak offered sacrifices, Balaam told the king, "Stand here by your burnt offerings, and I will go to see if the Lord will respond to me" (Numbers 23:3). Ultimately, his power could only accomplish what God would permit.

Amazingly, Balaam had an encounter with God, who chose to speak through Balaam though his lifestyle and beliefs were nothing like those of the prophets God would use to speak to His people in the coming years. If the manner of the message's delivery was odd, its content was even stranger to Balak: Balaam simply could not curse Israel. "How can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I condemn those whom the Lord has not condemned?" (verse 8). Not only that, God compelled Balaam to do the exact opposite of what Balak had commissioned him to do. In a great reversal, he blessed Israel. What Israel's enemy had intended for harm, God used for Israel's good.

Balaam could only speak as God would allow—like the donkey in chapter 22. The first of his three blessings over Israel contained multiple elements (23:9–10):

- Israel was unlike all the other nations around them.
- The Israelites would be multiplied beyond number.
- Their future was so bright that Balaam longed to experience it himself.

Balak was furious (verse 11). Rather than being weakened, Israel was empowered. Balaam's only explanation was that he was powerless to speak anything except the words God had put into his mouth (verse 12).

You may encounter adversaries—physical or spiritual—who wish you harm. But as Balaam and Balak learned, God is sovereign. No matter the enemy’s evil intention, God decides who He will bless (Exodus 33:19; Romans 9:15).

Discuss

- To your knowledge, has there ever been a time that God protected you before you even realized you were in danger?
- How can this story change our perspective and teach us to trust God?

Part 2—Israel Shall Rise Like a Lion

The God of Israel

Numbers 23:15–23

Say: Balak was desperate for a different outcome. He took Balaam to another mountain where he could see only some of the Israelites instead of the entire nation. “Curse at least that many!” he told Balaam (Numbers 23:13). But once again, Balaam would do just the opposite.

After making another round of costly sacrifices, Balaam instructed Balak to remain by the altars while he went to meet with God. Following the pattern of the first encounter, God put words into Balaam’s mouth, and he returned and delivered them. This time the message was directed to King Balak himself.

If Balak was annoyed by the first message, he must have been alarmed by the second. In their previous conversation, Balak and Balaam had both invoked the unique covenant name of the God of Israel—Yahweh, the Lord. They presumed that they could manipulate this foreign God to do their bidding against His own people. But the new message God put in Balaam’s mouth dispelled this foolish idea.

Through parallel phrases in verse 19, Balaam’s message corrected Balak’s flawed view of the God of Israel. Why couldn’t Balaam curse Israel? God’s nature would not allow it. His nature stands in stark contrast to the nature of the false Canaanite gods. His word is true, and His character is unchanging. He had promised to bless Israel, so nothing Balaam said or did would cause Him to change His mind.

In a declaration that must have made Balak’s courage melt away, Balaam said, “No trouble is in store for Israel. For the Lord their God is with them” (verse 21). No sorcerer’s tricks would have any effect. The Israelites’ God was strong (verse 22), and He was irreversibly committed to His people.

We also are God’s people. It is important that we understand our hope and security are not built on our worthiness. Even on our best behavior, we cannot manipulate God any more than Balaam could. Israel was victorious simply because God is faithful. He kept His promises to them. We have hope of eternal victory, knowing He will keep His promises to us as well.

Discuss

- What characteristics of God's nature comfort you most in difficult times?
- When God makes promises, He always keeps them. What are some promises God has made to His children in His Word?

Resource Packet Item 2: The Great Reversal

Students will observe the principle of reversal at work in the story of Balaam and plot out a story of reversal in their own life.

The Israel of God

Numbers 23:24

Say: Not only was God protecting His people, but He was also preparing them for battle. The conclusion of Balaam's second blessing must have sent chills down Balak's spine as he heard in frightening detail just how dangerous his situation had become.

As he listened to Balaam's second message, Balak's hope to defeat the Israelites was fading away. While most of the decree described God's nature and His commitment to Israel (Numbers 23:18–23), the last set of parallel thoughts painted a vivid picture of the Israelites themselves (verse 24).

The imagery was shocking and terrifying. The people of Israel would hunt their enemies like lions. Near the end of his life, the patriarch Jacob gathered his sons and pronounced a blessing over each one. To Judah, he declared, "Judah, my son, is a young lion that has finished eating its prey. Like a lion he crouches and lies down; like a lioness—who dares to rouse him?" (Genesis 49:9). As he spoke the words God put in his mouth, Balaam extended Judah's blessing to all of Israel. But although the lion in Judah's case had finished eating, the lion in Balaam's blessing had not eaten yet. It would not lie down until it had fully devoured its prey. There was no escape from the God of Israel; just as frightening for Balak, there was no escape from the Israel of God.

Sometimes these violent images in the Old Testament are difficult to understand in our day. Above any other explanation or rationale, we must remember that God is always just and His ways are always right. And as His people approached the Promised Land, His chosen moment for Israel's victory and Canaan's judgment had come.

The Israelites' strength was a direct result of their covenant relationship with God. He faithfully kept His promises to them. As God's people today, we can be confident in God's strength and faithfulness as well. We need not fear our enemies. Those who oppose God, threaten His people, and try to subvert His will are in far more danger than His children could ever be.

Discuss

- What is your reaction to God's description of His people in Numbers 23:24?

- When the people of Israel finally heard this story, how might they have reacted to the comparison God made?

Part 3—Blessed for Blessing Israel

An Outsider’s Blessing

Numbers 24:1–8

Say: After Balaam’s second blessing over Israel, “Balak said to Balaam, ‘Fine, but if you won’t curse them, at least don’t bless them!’ But Balaam replied to Balak, ‘Didn’t I tell you that I can only do what the Lord tells me?’” (Numbers 23:25–26). The stage was set for one final blessing.

Balaam may have learned better than to use his pagan practices of divination on this third occasion. While the text does not specifically explain what omens Balaam had previously attempted to interpret, other ancient literature implies that he used the old practice of trying to discern messages from the entrails of the sacrificial animals.

“By now Balaam realized that the Lord was determined to bless Israel” (Numbers 24:1). As Balaam was looking down on the Israelites’ camp, God’s Spirit came upon him, and he declared a powerful message of God’s blessings for Israel (verse 2). The nature of this Spirit-inspired declaration shares some similarities to the seventy elders prophesying at the tabernacle in Numbers 11:16–30.

Balaam’s third message was the most glorious yet (24:3–9). He declared God’s future blessings for Israel, foreseeing the rich bounty of the land and its new inhabitants. No evil intent or wicked scheme could thwart all that God had promised Israel. Like a mighty ox whose horns represented power and strength, God would go before Israel to crush their enemies.

Even this experience did not cause Balaam to turn to the one true God. After coming up with an alternate plan to damage Israel (Numbers 25), he was killed in the battle between the Israelites and the Midianites (Numbers 31:8). Although he had proclaimed God’s blessings, his greed and wickedness kept him from experiencing them.

God’s promises and blessings are available to anyone who will surrender their life to Him. Other people may fail and disappoint us, but we can have confidence in God’s unshakable faithfulness and power to keep His word.

Discuss

- What is your response to God’s choice to use someone like Balaam to declare His truth?
- Can you think of other examples in the Bible when God used unbelievers to accomplish His purposes?

The Fulfillment of an Old Promise

Numbers 24:9

Say: Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Numbers 24:2–3), Balaam continued his third message of blessing concerning what lay ahead for Israel. These words are still impacting the world today.

Balaam concluded this proclamation with a reminder of another blessing that had been given to the patriarchs of Israel: “Blessed is everyone who blesses you, O Israel, and cursed is everyone who curses you” (Numbers 24:9). The blessing, “I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt,” was first pronounced by God to Abraham (Genesis 12:3). Abraham’s son, Isaac, passed it on to his own son, Jacob (27:29). This was a foundational covenant blessing for Abraham and his descendants. It was also a warning to those who would oppose them.

When God established His covenant with Abraham, He was setting a plan in motion that would result in our salvation. God had promised Abraham that “all the families on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3), and Abraham “believed the Lord, and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith” (15:6). Generations later, that promise was completely fulfilled in Jesus (Romans 4). Even now, the destiny of every human being is tied to how they respond to Him.

In Numbers 24:9, a choice was placed before the people of Moab: How would they respond to the nation of Israel? If they worked against God’s plan, they would pay the price for cursing Israel. Today, a choice is placed before us: How will we respond to Jesus? Our decision will lead to either blessings or a curse (Hebrews 6:13–20).

Balaam’s words sent Balak into a rage. He commanded Balaam to leave Moab and refused to give him the reward they had agreed upon. As a parting shot, Balaam prophesied a distant future in which “a star will rise from Jacob; a scepter will emerge from Israel” (Numbers 24:17). This would be the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham. It would be the greatest blessing in all of history: the coming of Jesus.

Discuss

- What are some practical ways we can bless the people and the plan of God?

Resource Packet Item 3: Who Is This God?

God’s inherent nature protected Israel from Balak’s attacks. God simply could not break His promise to bless them. Students will explore other Scriptures to learn more about the characteristics of God’s nature.

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: Balaam could not help but bless Israel even when he was hired by their enemies to curse them. This is a powerful reminder that God’s plans cannot be overcome by any plan or attack of the enemy. Israel had no idea what was going on between Balak and Balaam, but God was still watching out for them. In fact, He used Balaam to bless them

and move the redemption story forward. We can rest in God's sovereignty, knowing He cares for us and will keep every promise He has made.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- When you start to feel anxious or overwhelmed this week, consciously pause to remind yourself that God is in control of your life.
- As a class, commit to pray together that God's purposes would be accomplished in our world even when enemies try to oppose His plans.
- Look for an opportunity this week to share the good news of Jesus with someone. God can use you to bless others!

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Melchizedek Honors Abram.

Genesis 14:18–20

Tuesday:

The Priestly Blessing.

Numbers 6:22–27

Wednesday:

Blessing or Curse.

Deuteronomy 11:26–32

Thursday:

The Beatitudes.

Matthew 5:3–12

Friday:

Words that Encourage.

Ephesians 4:25–29

Saturday:

The Untamed Tongue.

James 3:7–12