

Truth for Today

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The Parables of Balaam: Introduction and Numbers 23:7-10

We usually think of parables as being only in the New Testament. Many of them are familiar to us because they were told by the Lord Jesus. However, there are also parables in the Old Testament. On two occasions the speeches made by Job are described as parables (Job 27:1, 29:1). In Psalm 49:4 a parable is tantamount to a dark saying; difficult to understand without help. After all, the disciples of the Lord Jesus found some of His parables hard to take in. He had to explain them to them.

A frightened king

We are going to talk about Balaam's parables in our next four talks; there are four of these. The circumstances surrounding these parables are very strange. There is a king scared out of his wits! There were vast armies just about to invade his country, as he thought. Whatever was he to do? His description of these invaders was very graphic; this is how he describes them, *"Now shall this company lick up all that are round about us, as an ox licketh up the grass of the field"* (Numbers 22:4). King Balak was very sure that he was no match for these armies. So he sent for Balaam who lived about four hundred miles away. Balaam is mentioned in eight books of the Bible: five in the Old Testament (Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Nehemiah and Micah) and three in the New (2 Peter, Jude and Revelation), therefore we must pay attention to what is said about him.

A "prophet"

In the New Testament Balaam is referred to as a prophet, 2 Peter 2:15. A very strange prophet indeed! He is also described as a soothsayer, making contact with evil spirits (Joshua 13:22). We read that he sought for enchantments (Numbers 24:1). It was because of his reputation in this area that Balak sent for him. Nowadays he would be known as a spiritualist medium. Nowhere in the Bible does he get a good name. Balaam is altogether a complex character; very difficult to understand! He seems to have had a knowledge of God however perverted it may have been. Balak's plan was to hire the services of Balaam to put a curse upon the armies of Israel. Balak was in no doubt as to the latter's ability. Just listen to what he says, *"Come now therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people; for they are too mighty for me: peradventure I shall prevail, that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land: for I know that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed"* (Numbers 22:6). We are now able to see what a devilish scheme was being worked out.

A covetous man

However, God had different thoughts. Remember that the armies which Balak was so afraid of were God's people. What could puny man do to stop them? And so, when the messengers of Balak came to Balaam, they had in their hands the rewards of divination. It is clear that Balaam was well known as a covetous man. The prophet invited the messengers from Balak to lodge that night while he enquired of the Lord as to what his response should be (Numbers 22:8). During that night God asked Balaam who these men were and what their mission was (Numbers 22:9). After Balaam had told God who they were and what they were up to, God gave him a very distinct answer. Let's listen to it, *"And God said unto Balaam, Thou shalt not go with them; thou shalt not curse the people: for they are blessed"* (Numbers 22:12). On this first attempt Balaam listened and sent the messengers back, refusing to go with them (Numbers 22:13).

However, Balak wasn't so easily put off. He sent a second mission, this time sending princes and more honourable men (Numbers 22:15). Now he promised greater honour. We should remember that God had said, *"thou shalt not go with them"* (Numbers 22:12). This should have been sufficient. But Balaam wavers and keeps his visitors overnight again (Numbers 22:19). It is so obvious that it was the hope of reward that motivated him. When God saw that he was determined to go, He says, *"If the men come to call thee, rise up, and go with them; but yet the word which I shall say unto thee, that shalt thou do"* (Numbers 22:20). What a serious thing it is when men are so moved by greed that they would attempt to curse the people of God. Let's think a little longer about Balaam. We have already mentioned that these events are recorded in the New Testament.

A greedy man

On two occasions he is referred to as a greedy man (2 Peter 2:15, Jude 11). 2 Peter 2:15 tells us that he “*loved the wages of unrighteousness*”. In the Epistle of Jude he is quoted as an example of men who profess to be Christian leaders who “*run greedily after the error of Balaam for reward*” (Jude 11). The Apostle Paul, when writing to his son in the faith, Timothy, speaks about some, “*...supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself. But godliness with contentment is great gain*” (1 Timothy 6:5-6). This is good advice.

Coming back to our story, God does all He can to turn the prophet from his evil design. He puts the angel of the LORD in his way (Numbers 22:22). There are many who believe that this angel is a presentation of the Son of God in Old Testament times before the Incarnation. Balaam did not at first see this angel. However, his ass saw it and stopped in its tracks (Numbers 22:23). This made Balaam angry with the ass and he treated it brutally (Numbers 22:23-28). The ass rebuked the madness of the prophet, speaking with human voice (Numbers 22:29-30). But he still went on.

The first parable

We must come now to the first parable (Numbers 23:7-10). Balak must have thought that he had Balaam where he wanted him. But it must have shaken him when the prophet answered him in such a forceful way, “*How shall I curse, whom God hath not cursed? or how shall I defy, whom the LORD hath not defied?*” (Numbers 23:8). The position they took up to view God’s people is very interesting; “*from the top of the rocks I see him*” (Numbers 23:9). It is evident that he could see the whole camp from this vantage point settled just outside the borders of Moab. But the top of the rocks suggests that he saw the armies of Israel from God’s point of view. It is a good thing to get away from the thoughts of men and their opinions sometimes. Even with ourselves as Christians there are times when we become discouraged and self occupied. We think the world is falling apart. The top of the rocks speaks of the stability of God’s purpose.

Rocks

There is something immovable about rocks. I remember my wife and I spending a holiday in Devon some years ago. As most people do, we visited Dartmoor and saw those great rocks. They call them ‘tors’ don’t they? We partly climbed up Haytor. We both had an impression of something absolutely immovable. That is one of the lessons we learn from the rocks. It also says, “*and from the hills I behold him*” (Numbers 23:9). The hills speak of a clear atmosphere where we think soberly. If the rocks speak of stability, the hills tell of a place where we can understand God’s thoughts of grace towards His people. Psalm 139 was written by David, and he says “*How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! How great is the sum of them!*” (Psalm 139:17) It is very good to see other believers as God sees them. Let’s think about this for a moment! How does God see believers in the Lord Jesus Christ? The Apostle Paul, in his letters, very often uses the expression, “*in Christ*”. He even says we were “*chosen in Him before the foundation of the world*” (Ephesians 1:4). It is one of the easiest things in the world to find fault and criticise one another. Christians have been transferred, through God’s purpose and grace, to a new position. This is the way we can apply the “top of the rocks” position to ourselves.

In the first place, Numbers 23:7-10 refers to the nation of Israel. How did God regard that nation? Earlier, in the book of Exodus, they are said to be His peculiar treasure (Exodus 19:5). There was no way that Balaam could curse this people! So much for the top of the rocks! I can remember, some years ago, giving a talk on this scripture. I had said something to the effect that it was a good thing to be with Balaam on the top of the rocks. During the interval between the meetings an elderly Christian came to me. He said, “I agree that it is a good thing to be on the top of the rocks, but I wouldn’t like to be in the company of Balaam.” I was duly ticked off! I never said that again!

What Balaam said

Let’s go on a little further now. We have thought of his position; let’s think now of what he said. It is worth noting that, before this incident began, we read, “*And the LORD ... put a word in [Balaam’s] mouth...*” (Numbers 23:16) Balaam was intent on the reward he was going to get. But he couldn’t do a thing about it.

The people shall dwell alone

The parable itself consists of four short statements. They are not long, but very telling! Let’s deal with the first one: “*the people shall dwell alone*” (Numbers 23:9). This refers in the first place to the nation of Israel. God separated them to be His own peculiar people. The word ‘peculiar’ means a ‘people for a possession’. You might be surprised to find this expression used in the New Testament about Christians. Listen to it! “*...Our Saviour Jesus Christ; who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works*”. Titus 2:13-14. If we think of Israel as a nation, they were to be a sanctified people. This is equally true of believers in Christ. Much is said in the New Testament about sanctification. The word means ‘set apart’.

The people shall not be reckoned among the nations

The next part of the parable says, *“shall not be reckoned among the nations”* (Numbers 23:9). Israel were to be a separate people. It will be of interest to see that this manner of God’s dealing with men started with Abraham. Following the flood in Noah’s days (Genesis 6-8), only the eight souls preserved in the ark peopled the earth (see Genesis 7:13, 8:16, 18). God made a covenant that He would never again destroy the earth with a flood (Genesis 9:8-17). The sign of this covenant was the rainbow (Genesis 9:12-13). Do we think of this when we see the rainbow? God is faithful to His word.

It wasn’t long before men turned to the most terrible idolatry. Worse than that, they built the tower of Babel, making an attempt to dethrone God (Genesis 11:1-9). What was God to do now? The answer is that He called Abraham out from Ur of the Chaldees (Genesis 12:1-3), which was a land given up to the worship of idols. God promised the land of Canaan to Abraham’s descendants, although Abraham himself never possessed any of it. All he had was his tent and his altar and we are told that he called on the name of the LORD (Genesis 12:8). Abraham became the great example of faith.

God has never stopped working in this way! Springing from Abraham came the nation of Israel when they were brought out of bondage in Egypt. One of the later prophets wrote about this saying *“Out of Egypt have I called my son”* (Hosea 11:1). Just as Abram had been called out of Ur of the Chaldees, so the nation was called **out of** Egypt. They were to be separate from the nations around them. These nations were steeped in idolatry and all the evils that went along with it. Israel was to be a witness that JEHOVAH was the true God. The sad story is that Israel became like the other nations, worshipping idols also. They did not bear a faithful witness for God. It was because of this that Israel was eventually taken into captivity to Babylon. It should be said, however, that God never intended that Israel should look down on the Gentiles. They should have brought the knowledge of God to them.

Let’s move on a bit further. What about ourselves as Christians? We belong to the church! The first mention of the church is in Matthew 16:18. The Lord Jesus was addressing Peter who had confessed Him saying, *“Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (Matthew 16:16). Jesus said unto him, *“And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”* (Matthew 16:18). We have said that God has consistently worked in the same way as He did in Abraham’s time. Let’s think about the word ‘church’. The meaning of the word is **‘called out of’**.

So believers who form part of the church today are called to be separate from the world. This doesn’t mean we are to be hermits or shut ourselves in a monastery. We are to be active, pointing men to Christ. When the Lord Jesus was here, referring to His disciples, He said, *“They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world”* (John 17:16). However, before going back to His Father, He gave them a commission, and said, *“Go ye into the entire world, and preach the gospel to every creature”* (Mark 16:15). The world of pleasure seeking and money making should have no attraction for the Christian. But there is a world of men and women in need of the Gospel. We should be diligent in this respect!

Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the fourth part of Israel?

The third part of the parable is given in the form of a question, *“Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the fourth part of Israel?”* (Numbers 23:10) When God undertakes to bless, He does so abundantly. In the book of Genesis, God promised Abraham that his seed would be as the stars in heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore (Genesis 22:17). In Number 23:10 the metaphor “dust” is used. The idea in these expressions tells of what is countless. In the book of Revelation we read of, *“a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands”* (Revelation 7:9). What a day that will be! It may be that, in this parable, Israel is in focus. Think of their turmoil at the present day. Blessing in a large way will be their privilege in that future day.

The Lord Jesus told a parable about a certain man who made a great supper (Luke 14:15-24). There were many guests invited (Luke 14:16). When it was all prepared he sent a servant to say *“Come, for all things are now ready”* (Luke 14:17). The strange thing is, they didn’t want to come! So they all made excuses! (Luke 14:18-20) People are like that nowadays when they hear the Gospel; they are so busy with their own lives that they are not interested. So there was a call to others to come (Luke 14:21). But yet there was room (Luke 14:22). Then the servant was told to, *“go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in **that my house may be filled**”* (Luke 14:23). The gospel invitation is the same today and goes out to all, Jew and Gentile alike. The call is to Come! Everything has been prepared. Only trust and believe.

Let me die the death of the righteous

As we close this talk, let's think of Balaam's fourth expression. They are very solemn! "*Let me die the death of the righteous*" (Number 23:10). Alas, he was not prepared to live the life of the righteous. He came to a sad end, still in the company of God's enemies. As Christians, let us live so that we may enjoy the blessing of God now, and look forward to its full enjoyment in eternity.

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