

Truth for Today

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The Parables of Balaam: Numbers 24:15-25

As we start the fourth parable, we remember from our last talk that there were frayed tempers and hard words spoken. Balak, the king of Moab, felt badly let down by Balaam the prophet in whom he had put such trust. He said to Balaam, *"I called thee to curse mine enemies, and, behold, thou hast altogether blessed them these three times"* (Numbers 24:10). The conspiracy had gone badly wrong! As we have seen in our three previous talks, the people Balaam had been asked to curse were God's people. Balaam has to admit that he had no control over what he had said. God wasn't going to allow a curse to be put upon the nation whom He had blessed. Remember the messages of the last three parables.

1. God's sanctified people. (Numbers 23:7-10)
2. His justified people. (Numbers 23:18-24)
3. An orderly and united people. (Numbers 24:3-9)

A look at the future

Balaam was sent back to his place in disgrace without any reward. However, he wasn't going without having the last word. This is how he puts it, *"And now, behold, I go unto my people: come therefore, and I will advise thee what this people [Israel] will do to thy people [Moab] in the latter days"* (Numbers 24:14). This information is given in the fourth parable. It is quite obvious that this parable was not scheduled. It was supplementary, but gives us much teaching with regard to the future. Many centuries have passed since these parables were written, yet the prophetic contents have still to be fulfilled. Christians have always been very interested in this area of Bible teaching. This can be helpful so long as we do not become too occupied with the events. None of these things will take place until the Lord Jesus has come to take the church to heaven. As believers, we should be looking for Him. You may recall the parable told by the Lord Jesus about the wise and foolish virgins who were waiting for the coming of the bridegroom (Matthew 25:1-13). They all fell asleep (Matthew 25:5). At midnight there was a cry (Matthew 25:6). In the Authorised Version it says, *"Behold the bridegroom cometh"* (Matthew 25:6). In the original it just says, *"Behold the bridegroom"*. It is the Person who is coming that should attract our hearts. We love Him because He first loved us. Let's be looking for Him!

A time of trouble

The latter days of this fourth parable consider times on earth just prior to the coming of the Lord Jesus to reign. There is a time of trouble to fall upon the earth of such a kind that has never been known before. All men will be affected by it. However, the main brunt of it will be felt by the nation of Israel. The Old Testament scriptures describe it as a time of trouble. Listen to the prophet Daniel, *"And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time"* (Daniel 12:1). The godly ones will be delivered out of these terrible times. Blessing will come to the whole nation of Israel when they own their guilt in the crucifixion of its rightful King. This gives the setting of the events described in Balaam's parable.

God the Most High

In the parable we considered last week (Numbers 24:3-9), we came across a name of God we hadn't met with before. Remember? It was "the Almighty". We have it again in this fourth parable, but also, another name of God occurs which we haven't come across before. It is the "the most High". It is found in other parts of the Old Testament, usually in connection with the closing days. Its first mention in the Bible is in Genesis 14:18. This is a very interesting scripture and concerns a certain king whose name was Melchizedek. What is more, he is said to be, 'the priest of the Most High God' (Genesis 14:18). The Most High God is "possessor of heaven and earth". Looking around today we see men asserting themselves, just as though everything belonged to them. God is hardly recognised and owned in His own creation. It won't always be like that!

We have already thought of the great tribulation, bringing sorrow on the earth. When that day has run its course, there will appear the kingdom of the Son of Man, when God will not stand any interference in His running of things, whether in heaven or on earth. The story behind the appearance of Melchizedek is very telling. He lived at the same time as Abraham. There had been a war between certain kings and Lot, who was the nephew of Abraham (Genesis 12:5), got

mixed up in it and was taken prisoner (Genesis 14:1-17). However, Lot was rescued by his uncle (Genesis 14:16). In the New Testament, Melchizedek is mentioned on a number of occasions in the Letter to the Hebrews (Hebrews 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:1, 10-11, 15, 17, 21). His name means "*King of righteousness*" (Hebrews 7:2). He was also the King of Salem, which means "*King of peace.*" (Hebrews 7:2) He is a character of some importance because the writer says, "*consider how great this man was*" (Hebrews 7:4). His greatness is because he is a picture of the Lord Jesus as the true King. His Kingdom will be righteous and the result will be peace. When He comes to reign He will bless His victorious people Israel, just as he blessed Abraham when he had rescued Lot out of captivity. So, arising out of this first mention of "the most High God" we have an incident which helps us to understand the bearing of this final parable.

All shall see Him

Numbers 24:17 is very solemn. Balaam had no real prospect in view. There was one thing he does seem sure about, which everyone should be assured of. Listen to his words, "*I shall see him, but not now; I shall behold him, but not nigh*" (Numbers 24:17). It is in the New Testament that we learn, "*Behold he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him*" (Revelation 1:7). It is the Lord Jesus whom every eye shall see! Even unbelievers will see Him, but it will be as Judge. Balaam had no hope. He had lived for himself and sold himself to the Devil.

Of course, there were men of faith in the Old Testament whose hopes were brighter than Balaam's. Just think of Job and listen to what he said! Speaking of the God he knew so well he says, "*Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another*" (Job 19:27). Job's words ring with a sure and certain hope. The Apostle John conveys the same certainty to Christians today. In his first letter he writes about the Lord's appearing, saying, "*But we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is*" (1 John 3:2). Coming back to Balaam he could only say, "*I shall behold him, but not nigh*" (Numbers 24:17). Let us make sure that, for ourselves, we are really believers in the Lord Jesus so that our prospect is sure.

The Star and Sceptre

The next part of our parable concerns the Star and the Sceptre. These two ideas are found in different parts of the Bible. There are New Testament scriptures which deal with each. We do not know how much Balaam really understood, but he makes a striking statement. "*There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel*" (Numbers 24:17). In the other scriptures mentioned, the word sceptre may not be used, but the idea behind it is there. The star is for watchers. We must be up early in the morning if we wish to see the early star. The sceptre speaks of authority and rule.

Some of you may remember the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. During the solemn ceremony she held in her right hand the sceptre. This represented the responsibility of rule. We find the first mention of the star in the New Testament in the early chapters of the gospel of Matthew. It was when the wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem. It wasn't actually at the exact time of the birth of Christ, but a little while after. They must have been watchers! They came with the request, "*Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him*" (Matthew 2:2). How did these Gentiles find this out? Did they have access to the Jewish scriptures? There were many, we believe, in those faraway times who grew tired of the idolatry they were surrounded with. These men were earnest seekers for light and one night, as they looked into the heavens, they saw a star that held their gaze. They said, "This is it!" and they made their long journey to Jerusalem. There is a lesson for us all from this. It is a long time since these men lived, but God is still the same. Whenever there is genuine seeking for light, God will help us. We have an advantage in our day; we have all the scriptures. But in spite of that, we often find difficulties. It may be even something relating to our circumstances. Pray about it. God is faithful!

Think again of the words of these wise men. "*We have seen **His** star in the east*" (Matthew 2:2). They were able to grasp the link between the Star and the Sceptre. Remember, "*Where is he that is born **King** of the Jews?*" (Matthew 2:2) Most of us know how all of this aroused the jealousy of King Herod. Instead of rejoicing, we read that all Jerusalem was troubled (Matthew 2:3). Herod devised his wicked scheme to kill the young child (Matthew 2:7-14). God overruled for His own glory. The wise men were able to bring their gifts and worship to the King (Matthew 2:11).

The next occasion where the picture of the Star and Sceptre appears is in the Apostle Peter's second letter (2 Peter 1:16-18). It concerns the mount of transfiguration (Matthew 17:5, Mark 9:7, Luke 9:35). Peter was there and was greatly impressed by what he saw. We will think of the Sceptre first. In the first chapter he writes, "*But we were eyewitnesses of His Majesty*" 2 Peter 1:16. The word has a royal ring about it. As Peter recalled that night upon the mount, he thought of all the wonderful Old Testament scriptures about the coming kingdom of the Lord Jesus. He was quite sure that all would be fulfilled. But now he writes, "*We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the [morning star] arise in your hearts*" (2 Peter 1:19). The scene witnessed by Peter on the holy mount was a preview of the coming kingdom. If there were any doubts in the mind of Peter and those with him, they were removed then. And so he writes, "*the prophetic word is made surer*" (2 Peter 1:19). This is another translation of the verse just quoted. The day dawn is the

day of the kingdom. The morning star arises in our hearts; it is the Christian's hope. It is a guarantee of the day of glory. So we have the Sceptre and the Star together again.

One more scripture may be sufficient. It is in Revelation 22:16; *"I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star"*. In the first part of Revelation 22:16, the Lord Jesus is King in David's line. He has every right to the Sceptre. He is the Offspring of David as born in Bethlehem. As the Root of David He is God, from whom David sprang. In the second part of the verse He is the morning Star. This is the way Christians know Him. We are to be watchers, looking for the Star of the morning, who will come at any moment. He says, *"Behold, I come quickly"* (Revelation 22:7).

End times

The last few verses of our chapter take us back to the great tribulation again. There is an amazing amount of detail given. Many different nations are mentioned, some of which have been lost in history. Nations that have set themselves against God down through the past ages will be represented there. The institutions which men thought to be stable and secure will be brought down. In Matthew 24:22 we have a description of these end times. *"And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened"*. Just compare this verse with Numbers 24:23. *"Alas, who shall live when God doeth this!"* It is clearly the same period of time. Following on from these terrible days, Christ will appear and set up His kingdom, and peace will be the result. The message from this fourth parable presents to us a people with a sure and certain hope.

Jacob and Israel

In each of the four parables we have seen that the nation, which Balaam had been hired to curse, is addressed as both Jacob and Israel. The first parable put it plainly. Balak's commission to Balaam was, *"Come, curse me Jacob, and come, defy Israel"* (Numbers 23:7). Jacob, in the first place, was Abraham's grandson. As time went on, the name Jacob became attached to the whole nation. There is a marked resemblance *between* Jacob's history and that of the nation. All the promises made to Abraham would be inherited by Jacob. Just think of the trouble Jacob would have avoided if he had waited on God's time. But that wasn't Jacob!

He deceived his nearly blind father, Isaac, by taking the blessing that rightly belonged to Esau, his brother (Genesis 27:1-40). He had to flee from the wrath of Esau (Genesis 27:41-28:4). For over twenty years he was an exile in the home of Laban (Genesis 28:5-29:28), his mother's brother. Laban was just as shrewd as Jacob. He was a hard taskmaster and Jacob worked hard for very small wages. Rachel was one of Laban's two daughters and Jacob loved her (Genesis 29:1-14). A bargain was struck; he was to work for seven years for Rachel (Genesis 29:15-22). When the years were completed, through Laban's trickery, it wasn't Rachel he had worked for, it was her sister Leah (Genesis 29:23-29). This cost Jacob another seven years labour for the daughter he loved (Genesis 29:27). The troubles endured by Jacob over the whole of his life were many. At Peniel he was renamed Israel (Genesis 32:28); this was repeated again at Bethel (Genesis 35:10). All the way through God was dealing with His servant. At the end of his ways, he has to speak of God as the *"God who has fed me all my life long unto this day"* (Genesis 48:15). However, in the New Testament we learn of his greatest triumph. *"He worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff"* (Hebrews 11:21).

There are many lessons we can learn from God's dealings with Jacob. In Hebrews 12:11, the writer refers to chastening. Maybe we are a little wary of this subject. The word really means 'child training'. We must not despise the chastening of the neither Lord nor faint when we are reprov'd by Him. Listen carefully to Hebrews 12:11, *"Now no chastening for the present seemeth joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto those who are exercised thereby"*. On one occasion at the end of Jacob's life, he almost reached the end of his tether. Just listen, *"All these things are against me"* (Genesis 42:36). Have you ever felt like that? We can't really say that, can we? God assures us, *"All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose"* (Romans 8:28).

We have already pointed out the similarity between Jacob's personal life and Israel's national history. Think of their centuries of exile. Ever since the captivity in Babylon in 588 BC they have never been free. Some of us can remember the setting up of the State of Israel in 1948. However, it is a very fragile situation at the moment. But soon all will be fulfilled; their exile will be over for ever. May these talks from these obscure parables be an encouragement to us in our day.

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