

# Prophet vs. Donkey

**BALAAM • PART 2 • NUMBERS 22:21-41**

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***\*\*COVID-19 SPLIT SERVICE\*\****

It is good to be with you this morning! I hope all of us have the elements for the Lord's Supper (either from home or from the table in the back room), as John will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper after our study this morning. Then, after the Lord's Supper, Caleb will be leading us in "My God and I" (#417).

As our tradition has been since the pandemic began, we want to start today by giving at least a brief summary of God's plan for saving us. We know that we have sinned, those sins have separated us from God (who is holy), and yet, because he loved us so much, and to make a way for us to come back, God sent his only Son as a sacrifice for us. He lived a perfect life and offered himself up on the cross as a substitute. In response, we hear the message, we believe it, we have a change of heart and turn away from sin, we confess our faith in Jesus as the Son of God, and then we allow ourselves to be buried with him in the act of baptism, a burial in water for the forgiveness of sins. At that point, we are born into God's family and the Christian life begins.

And once again, we have some good news to share from the Gulf Shores congregation down in Alabama, as Katy Newton was baptized this week. We rejoice with her husband, Chase, we are thankful for Tyler, the preacher down there, and we share this by way of encouragement: What Katy has done this week, you can do today. If you have any questions, if you would like to study together, please get in touch.

This morning, we return to a series of lessons we started last Lord's Day morning, at the request of one of our Christian sisters, who was asking for more information on Balaam in the book of Numbers. I realize that many people might think of Numbers as being rather boring. And I do understand: It is a book of numbers! And yet, as we study Balaam, we actually find one of the most interesting accounts anywhere in the Bible.

Last week, we set the stage with the Israelites coming out of 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, and right at the very end of that they camp out right across the Jordan River from Jericho, but with a group of 2-3 million people, they cause a bit of a panic among the locals. King Balak of Moab, then, tries to hire the prophet Balaam from way up north. Balaam is not a prophet in the traditional sense of that word, but he's more like a seer, a fortune-teller, a witch doctor, a sorcerer of some kind, and he's well known for cursing people.

Last week, then, we looked at Balaam as a prophet for sale or rent. God tells him not to curse the people of Israel, but as a for-profit prophet, Balaam really wants the payout, so he presses forward. And in terms of practical application of that passage, we learned that as we make decisions in our own lives, we need to be aware that money is a powerful (and sometimes dangerous) motivator, we learned that there are some things we do NOT need to pray about (when God reveals something in his word we don't need to be going back to him again and again looking for a different answer), and we also learned ultimately that God does not approve of everything he allows. If we insist on ignoring his word, sometimes he lets us learn some lessons the hard way.

And that's how we left it last week. God has very clearly told Balaam not to go, Balaam (wanting the money) insists on going, and at the end of our study last week, God finally allows it, "Fine, if you insist on going, then go." [paraphrased]. Today, we pick up with what happens next, as Balaam saddles up his donkey and heads out with the officials from Moab. We have a royal procession going on here – a parade of dignitaries, most likely accompanied by servants and security of some kind.

We pick up, then, with Numbers 22:21-41,

***<sup>21</sup> So Balaam arose in the morning, and saddled his donkey and went with the leaders of Moab.***

***<sup>22</sup> But God was angry because he was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as an adversary against him. Now he was riding on his donkey and his two servants were with him. <sup>23</sup> When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand, the donkey turned off from the way and went into the field; but Balaam struck the donkey to turn her back into the way. <sup>24</sup> Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path of the vineyards, with a wall on this side and a wall on that side. <sup>25</sup> When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pressed herself to the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall, so he struck her again.***

***<sup>26</sup> The angel of the LORD went further, and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn to the right hand or the left. <sup>27</sup> When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam; so Balaam was angry and struck the donkey with his stick. <sup>28</sup> And the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" <sup>29</sup> Then Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a mockery of me! If there had been a sword in my hand, I would have killed you by now." <sup>30</sup> The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I ever been accustomed to do so to you?" And he said, "No."***

***<sup>31</sup> Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed all the way to the ground. <sup>32</sup> The angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out as an adversary, because your way was contrary to me. <sup>33</sup> But the donkey saw me and turned aside from me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, I would surely have killed you just now, and let her live." <sup>34</sup> Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the way against me. Now then, if it is displeasing to you, I will turn back." <sup>35</sup> But the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but you shall speak only the word which I tell you." So Balaam went along with the leaders of Balak.***

***<sup>36</sup> When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, which is on the Arnon border, at the extreme end of the border. <sup>37</sup> Then Balak said to Balaam, "Did I not urgently send to you to call you? Why did you not come to me? Am I really unable to honor you?" <sup>38</sup> So Balaam said to Balak, "Behold, I have come now to you! Am I able to speak anything at all? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I shall speak." <sup>39</sup> And Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-huzoth. <sup>40</sup> Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and sent some to Balaam and the leaders who were with him. <sup>41</sup> Then it came about in the morning that Balak took Balaam and brought him up to the high places of Baal, and he saw from there a portion of the people.***

We have quite a bit going on in this passage, but the highlight is that God speaks through a donkey! Most of us probably talk to our pets, but generally speaking, our pets do not respond (at least with words). But here, God uses one of the most humble animals ever created to accomplish his will. If I were to challenge us to make a list of some other scenarios when God used animals to accomplish his will, I'm guessing we could come up with quite a few. I'm thinking of the great fish sent to swallow Jonah, or the worm sent by God to attack his plant. We might think of the rooster given the job of reminding Peter of what he had done. We might think of the raven and the dove sent out by Noah. We might think of the ravens commanded by God to bring food to Elijah in the wilderness during the drought. We might think of the locusts and the frogs sent by God to torment Pharaoh in Egypt. We might think of the fish that swallowed the coin and allowed itself to be caught by Peter. But God actually speaking through an animal is quite unique. And he uses a donkey! This is probably the second most famous donkey in scripture, the first being the donkey Jesus rode into Jerusalem so many years ago today.

A donkey has to be one of God's most humble creatures. If somebody calls me a donkey, I'm thinking it's probably not a compliment. You might get away with calling somebody a stud, but not a donkey. We have the Ford Mustang, but we do not have the Dodge Donkey, for a good reason. Donkeys were the old beat-up pickup trucks of the ancient world. They hauled stuff. They were slow and stubborn, but they got the job done. And now we have a donkey that has gone full-blown "Mr. Ed," a talking donkey. And what is amazing to me is that when the donkey talks, Balaam responds! In this royal procession back to Moab, Balaam is having a conversation with his pickup truck. This is pretty much what's happening here.

As we make sense of what happens here, as we try to find some meaning in all of this for us today, I'd like to make several observations. We won't be working through this text verse by verse, but as we look back over this passage as a whole, let's notice a few things.

# **I. And I want us to start by noticing that all of this happens because Balaam is OPPOSED BY GOD.**

And we see this right away in verses 21-22, ***"So Balaam arose in the morning, and saddled his donkey and went with the leaders of Moab. But God was angry because he was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as an adversary against him."*** Sometimes the ***"angel of the Lord"*** seems to refer to the pre-incarnate Jesus, Jesus before he came in the flesh. Sometimes people seem to worship the ***"angel of the Lord,"*** and it seems to be allowed, with a shift from an angel to deity, and that almost seems to be the case here. So, God is ***"angry"*** with what Balaam is doing here, and so the Lord sends his angel to stand in the way as an ***"adversary"*** against him. And Balaam has put himself in this position by disobeying God's original command. It's much better, of course, to be working together with God, instead of against God. We think of what Paul would go on to write in Romans 8:31, ***"What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?"*** That's a good question! If God is for us, it really doesn't matter who is against us. On the other hand, if God is against us, it

really doesn't matter who is for us. Balaam, then, causes this adversarial relationship. He and God are working against each other here.

I think about what James says about the word of God in James 1:18-19, when he says, ***"This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God."*** As we've discussed many times before, most people yank this passage out of context and try to apply it to interpersonal relationships. When it comes to my wife, or my neighbor, I need to be ***"quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to get angry."*** But that's not what James is saying. In the paragraph where that quote comes from, he's talking about how we receive the word of God. When God speaks in his word, we are to be quick to hear it, we are to be slow to speak out against it, and we are to be slow to get angry with God over what he has said. But isn't that what Balaam is doing here? Isn't he doing the opposite of what James recommends? Balaam doesn't want to hear what God has to say, he's doing everything possible to speak out against it, and he is certainly angry that God is preventing him from getting paid here.

And this opposition to God and his word is what leads to all the trouble in this passage. When we are against God, God is against us. Sometimes, our trouble is self-inflicted. And this is the angel's message from God in verse 32, ***"Behold, I have come out as an adversary, because your way was contrary to me."*** Yes, God is allowing Balaam to do this, but Balaam's choice is against God. He's made himself an enemy of God.

God, then, is throwing up some opposition. God is putting some speedbumps in the road. God is giving Balaam some time to think this through a little more. Most of us hate getting delayed on a trip. But that's what happens here. What's going on here is the ancient version of car trouble. I've had some epic car trouble in my life – some bad ignition wiring on an old Volkswagen on my first trip to Freed-Hardeman in the freezing rain (no lights, no wipers, no engine, followed by a tow in the middle of nowhere), a blowout going 70 MPH on I-57 just south of Effingham, a failed throw-out bearing on a Subaru clutch in Tennessee a few years ago when the nearest Subaru clutch had to be shipped in from Atlanta (causing me to have to sleep in the back of a U-Haul during a hailstorm and tornado warning). Fun times! But this is how God gets Balaam's attention. He gives him some donkey trouble. And that's what I want us to notice first: All of this is happening because Balaam is opposed by God. All of this could have been avoided. So, in terms of a practical application here: If our donkey stops in the middle of the road, let's at least ask ourselves: Have I brought this on myself? And let's at least be open to the possibility that our donkey troubles are self-inflicted. Not always, of course, but trouble should always cause us to slow down and think things through – to make sure we are with God and not opposed to God in the choices we are making. We think of Paul on his missionary journeys as he describes doors opening and doors closing. Let's make sure we are not beating down a door that God has closed, as Balaam is doing.

**II. I would make a second observation here, and that is: BALAAM IS A CASE STUDY IN STUBBORNNESS! In fact, I've summarized this as STUBBORN VS. STUBBORN, because we have a stubborn prophet facing off against one of the most stubborn animals God ever created!**

This is what donkeys are known for, and yet we nearly have a donkey out-stubborned by a prophet. Not only is Balaam stubbornly refusing to listen to God's original command, but as we look at what happens here, we have Balaam get mad at his donkey not once, not twice, but three times! We have the donkey turn off into the field, we have the donkey crush Balaam's foot against the wall, and then we have the donkey just lay down right in the middle of the path. Someone has described this as the first case of road rage in the Bible, and I suppose it is. I suppose it also serves as a reminder that when God slows you down, don't go giving somebody else a beating

for it! And yet, that's what we are sometimes tempted to do. When things don't go our way, it is so easy for us to stubbornly press forward, even getting angry at the people around us.

From Balaam's point of view, the donkey is making him look bad. This is embarrassing, to have your donkey break down when you are in a procession of dignitaries on your way to do something important. Stubbornly, though, Balaam starts beating his donkey – the first two times with his hand, apparently, and then the third time with his stick or staff. Only after that third beating does the donkey finally speak up, ***“What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?”*** Not only can the donkey talk, but she can also count! And what's even more amazing than a talking donkey is that Balaam responds to his talking donkey! We have a full-blown donkey conversation going on here! And sometimes I wonder whether the officials could see and understand what was going on here. Is this a case of Mr. Ed, or is this a case of Dr. Dolittle? Can Balaam's traveling companions hear the donkey speaking, or do they only hear Balaam's half of this conversation? I'm thinking of Saul hearing the voice on the road to Damascus. He could hear and understand, but the others could not. I don't know, but either way, Balaam is stubborn here, isn't he? He forces his donkey back on the path, then he keeps going after getting his foot crushed, and then he starts beating this creature with his staff when she sits down.

Just a brief side note here: I find it interesting that God's first words through the donkey were words of concern for the donkey herself. God does not endorse unnecessary cruelty to animals. Yes, animals serve us, yes, we have God's permission to eat them, but we do not have God's permission to beat them mercilessly with a stick! In Proverbs 12:10, King Solomon says, ***“A righteous man has regard for the life of his animal, but even the compassion of the wicked is cruel.”*** It is wrong to abuse an animal.

But our focus here is on the stubbornness, as the most stubborn of all animals (the donkey) is nearly out-stubborned by a prophet. I'm reminded of Solomon's words in Proverbs 16:25, when he said, ***“There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”*** Sometimes we stubbornly travel down the wrong road, refusing to receive any correction, and that is one of the warnings from Balaam in this passage. Beware of stubbornness. I've often said, though, that God can use strong-willed people. I call as evidence: Moses and Peter, two of the most strong-willed people who ever lived, but they allowed themselves to be molded and changed by God. The point here is: Beware of the stubbornness of Balaam.

### **III. I would make another observation based on this passage, as we note the irony of Balaam being BLIND SEER.**

What I mean by this is: Although Balaam is a prophet who can supposedly see things that other people cannot see, in this situation he is completely unable to see what should be abundantly obvious! Balaam is supposedly more in touch with the spirit world than anybody; after all, that's why he's getting paid here, but he is completely blind to a sword-wielding angel standing directly in his path. And not only that, but his donkey can see the spiritual situation here even more clearly than he can! And even outside the miraculous, I think most of us understand that animals can often sense things we can't. Isn't that right? Our dog knows when the UPS driver starts THINKING about turning down our street. I don't hear it, I don't feel it, but she does: The murder van is on its way! I must protect my humans! We think of those situations where elephants and other animals in India start heading inland and uphill 10-20 minutes before the tsunami hits. They know. They sense something. In perhaps a slightly similar way, the donkey would make a better prophet than Balaam in this situation. King Balak, in fact, should probably be paying the donkey. And to make the contrast between Balaam and his donkey even more obvious, notice how Balaam says that if he had had a sword, he would have killed his donkey, and yet who

is it who is truly in danger of getting killed by a sword in this passage? Not the donkey, but Balaam! So here's Balaam, who can supposedly manipulate the gods to call down curses on various nations, but he can't even get his donkey to walk on a path. This is because Balaam is blind to what is really happening here. Instead of reading the stars or massaging a goat liver (or whatever), this man needs to listen to his donkey! And even if he had never seen the angel, he should have at least been able to see the behavior of his donkey. But he was blind. As we learned last week, he was blinded by his love of money. He was so focused on the potential payout that he completely missed what should have been obvious.

Now, as to what this means for us: Aren't there times when we sin, even when we know better? We've been blinded by some obsession, just as Balaam was blinded by his love of money. Sometimes everybody around us sees something more clearly than we do. This is why we have "interventions." Sometimes we pull somebody aside to explain things the way they really are, because the person in the middle of it is blind to what is going on. That's Balaam in this account. Even his donkey can see what he cannot.

**IV. Before we close today, I want us to notice at least one lesson from the donkey: In this account, the donkey is FAITHFUL, EVEN WHEN IT ISN'T APPRECIATED.**

Let's think about this from her point of view for a moment: The donkey is doing what she is supposed to be doing! She is this man's main method of getting around, she's obviously been doing this for a while, they have some kind of history with each other, she'd never behaved like this before. The donkey is faithful. In fact, the donkey is about the ONLY thing that's faithful in this chapter. Truth is truth, even if it comes from a donkey! After all, nobody else seems to be speaking truth in this chapter, but the donkey gets it. The donkey sees what others don't, and she is faithful – to the message and to her owner. She protects Balaam from himself here.

I think of what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:27, ***"...but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong."*** Isn't that what God does here as he opens the mouth of a donkey to teach a lesson, to get this man's attention? And what does she get in response? She gets beaten! She gets abused! She gets yelled at! So, the donkey is faithful, even when not appreciated.

I don't think it's the main point of this passage, but don't we find ourselves in similar circumstances sometimes today? I think of the work parents do. One thing I'm thankful for is that as my sister and I were growing up, we always had good bread at home. But you know, we didn't really appreciate it at the time. My mom made us sandwiches on what we would sometimes call "gravel bread." You know why we called it that? It was the good stuff – whole wheat, whole grain, made with stuff that actually grew in a field somewhere! Meanwhile, we looked at our friends whose sandwiches were made with Wonder Bread. And we might have been a little jealous. Little did we know how blessed we actually were! Once I became a parent myself, I realized: Wow, gravel bread is expensive! And it's also a lot healthier. But even when we didn't appreciate it, our parents continued providing us with what was actually good for us.

In a similar way, this donkey wasn't really appreciated either, just as we won't always be appreciated when we are faithful. Especially if we do what this donkey did. I can't help but think of the last two verses of James where James says, ***"My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."*** Does that not describe what Balaam's donkey does? Doesn't she literally ***"turn a sinner from the error of his way,"*** and ***"save his soul from death"***? But is she appreciated? Not at the time. Not as she is heading off into

a field, not when she is crushing Balaam's foot against the wall, not when she is sitting down in the middle of the road (like a ship stuck sideways in the Suez Canal). The donkey was not appreciated, but she was faithful. And there seems to be a lesson here for us: Be faithful. As God's people, we are called upon to turn people from the error of their ways, even if it's not appreciated at the time. Be the donkey!

### **Conclusion:**

And this brings us to the end of this passage. It ends with what seems to be an apology, and yet with hindsight, it's obvious that Balaam is not sincere at all. In fact, we have a pretty big clue right there in verse 34. As he is confronted by the angel, Balaam says, **"I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the way against me. Now then, if it is displeasing to you, I will turn back."** Think about that. Here's a man run off the road, crushed, and nearly sat on by his donkey, only to find an angel with a sword standing in the path saying that he is opposing God and that he would have killed him if it weren't for his donkey, and Balaam says, **"Now then, if it is displeasing to you, I will turn back."** In his mind, Balaam still wants that money. He still wants to prophesy in a way that will please the king of Moab. If he were truly sincere here, he would leave and perhaps go join up with Moses and Joshua. But as it is, he's still looking for a loophole. Repentance is more than a feeling. Repentance is more than falling down in terror before an angel. True repentance is a change of mind, resulting in a change in the way we live, and that hasn't happened yet in Balaam's life. In reality, Balaam is still opposed by God, and stubborn, and blind. And his donkey is still more faithful than he is.

We learn, though, that God ***"...is patient toward [us], not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance"*** (2 Peter 3:9). He could have killed Balaam right here, but he didn't. God still has work for Balaam to do. And that's what we see in the last paragraph here in Numbers 22. In my mind, I see Balaam hobbling in with a crushed ankle, limping in on his staff, and King Balak basically says, "What took you so long?" And Balaam pretty much replies, "Well, I'm here now, but I can only tell you what God tells me to tell you" [paraphrased]. And Balak brings him up to a cliff overlooking some of the Israelites, and Balak is expecting the curse that he's paid for. That sets us up for next week, as we plan on looking at the next two chapters (Numbers 23-24).

Before we close, can we think for just a moment about how we have this account? And how did it end up in Numbers? Balak certainly didn't come tell the Israelites about this. We have no record of Balaam telling anybody about this. This isn't the kind of thing you want to get out there if you make a living doing this kind of thing. This is an epic failure on Balaam's part. How do we know about this? This is inspiration. This is God communicating to Moses. We have Moses leading several million people, and there's a good chance they're tired and probably a bit nervous, camped out across the Jordan River from the Promised Land, surrounded on all sides by several powerful nations. I want us to imagine Moses pulling up to a campfire. You can see the lights from enemy camps up in the cliffs all around. And I want us to imagine Moses, 120 years old, twice as old as just about anybody else, "Kids, I know you're scared tonight, but I need to tell you something. God came and talked to me today, and you know what he told me? He told me that the King of Moab traveled hundreds of miles to find somebody to curse us. He found a world-famous sorcerer, and the man tried, but on the way here he got in a bit of an argument with his donkey, because the Angel of the Lord was protecting us by standing in the way!" I can see the kids getting a kick out of this. I'm imagining some laughing at Balaam's expense here. But I imagine Moses asking, "And do you know why that angel was standing in the way? Because of a promise God made to Abraham many years ago,



***Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.  
I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you*** (Genesis 12:1-3).

Thank you so much for being with us today. Before John leads us in the prayers for the Supper, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the great and awesome God, the God who promised Abraham that through his descendants all the nations of this earth would be blessed. We have now seen that promise realized in Jesus, through his life, and death, and resurrection. Thank you for allowing us to look behind the scenes this morning, allowing us to see one small way you protected your people.

We pray that instead of stubbornly insisting on our own way we might instead put our trust in you. We pray that we would truly turn away from sin.

Thank you, Father, for hearing our prayer. We come to you through Jesus our Savior. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)