

Balaam's Loophole

BALAAM • PART 5 • NUMBERS 25

Baxter T. Exum (#1591)
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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/Aaron will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper after our study this morning. Then, after the Lord's Supper, Josh/Caleb will be leading us in "Yield Not to Temptation" (#798).

As our tradition has been since the pandemic began, we'd like to start today by summarizing God's plan of salvation. We've sinned, but God made a way for sin to be forgiven. He sent his only Son to die for us, he was buried, but he was raised up on the third day. In response, we hear this, we believe it, we turn away from sin, we confess Jesus as being the Son of God, and we allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins, at which point God adds us to his kingdom, the church.

And once again, we have some good news to share. We actually have several today, starting with Justice England, who was baptized this week at the Glendale Road congregation down in Murray, Kentucky. I believe this is the congregation where Spencer Grodi has attended while he's been in college down there. But we rejoice with Justice and his decision to obey the gospel this week.

We also have some great news from northeast Ghana, as an entire denominational group has obeyed the gospel. After a series of Bible studies with some New Testament Christians, their founding "pastor and prophet" Isaac Asampana and his wife went first, and the rest of the congregation followed, as all of them were immersed in water for the forgiveness of their sins. We rejoice with this new congregation over in Ghana!

And then, we also noticed this week that Nellie Davis obeyed the gospel in Rush Springs, Oklahoma, back on April 4. What makes this unique is that Nellie is 101 years old. I believe she is actually from Marlow, Oklahoma (just southwest of Oklahoma City), but they must not have a baptistery at that congregation, so they came up to Rush Springs on a Sunday afternoon two weeks ago. And, as usual, we are sharing all of this by way of encouragement: What Justice, and Nellie, and the entire group in Ghana have done, you can do today. If you have any questions, if you would like to study together, please get in touch.

Before we get to our study, I'd like to give just a brief update on the challenge of communicating some of the statistics we've referred to over the past few weeks. We can no longer just take attendance by counting everybody like we used to! It got complicated a year ago! So, on the back of the bulletin, you might have noticed the "Our Attitude" section. We add the two figures from the 9 a.m. and the 10:30 service for the "In-Person Attendance." Then, we also note how many joined us on YouTube on Sunday, and then we also add how many joined us on the phone on Sunday. And we do the same thing on Wednesday. And I don't know if you can see the fine print down at the bottom, but this is not an exact science, because the YouTube and phone figures do not include multiple people using the same device. Hopefully we can give some more updates in the near future.

This morning, we conclude a series of lessons we started several weeks ago, at the request of one of our Christian sisters, who was asking for more information on Balaam in the book of Numbers. As we have discovered over the past few weeks, Balaam is a strange character! We have more than three chapters of the Bible dedicated to this pagan seer, described in the New Testament as a false prophet, and yet in the book of Numbers he actually seems to teach the truth, although with evil motives. 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, especially with King Balak of Moab, who tries to hire Balaam to curse the Israelites. He is a prophet for sale or rent. We looked at some practical lessons from Balaam, including the danger of loving money and the danger of trying to manipulate God to get what we want, and the danger is: Sometimes God lets us have our own way!

As Balaam continues stubbornly on his way despite being opposed by God, we then have something of a showdown between a stubborn donkey and a stubborn prophet! Balaam is blind to the truth until his donkey speaks up and clarifies a few things. And we learned from the donkey herself, that she was faithful to both God and Balaam, in terms of saving his life.

Then, over the past two weeks, we looked at a series of four oracles delivered by Balaam to King Balak. Balak has hired Balaam to curse Israel. However, whenever Balaam opens his mouth, instead of a curse, a blessing pops out! And at the end of our study last week, we had Balaam leaving to go home, unpaid. As we keep reading into Numbers 25, it seems as if we have left Balaam behind. He's not mentioned in Chapter 25. However, as with much of what we know about Balaam, we don't have the full picture until much later. And the reality is: Balaam is absolutely responsible for what happens next.

As we conclude this series of lessons on Balaam, I want us to start by looking at what we know about Balaam from outside the book of Numbers. Then I want us to take that information and apply it as we look at the sin that happens in Numbers 25. And then I want us to look at God's judgment and the aftermath of what happens here. And we will close by asking the "So what?" question.

But even before we dive in here, I'd like to emphasize that Balaam seems to be looking for a LOOPHOLE. I've mentioned this a few times over the past few weeks. He really wants to get paid to curse Israel, but God is not allowing it, so he's looking for some other way. As I was preparing today's lesson, I looked up the word "loophole," and I learned that it goes back to those narrow windows we might find in a castle or a fort of some kind. The "hole" part of the word we understand, "an opening." But the "loop" part of the word is a little more difficult. It goes back to word meaning "to see" (a little bit Dutch, a bit of early German, with a bit of medieval Latin thrown in). Perhaps we are familiar with a jeweler's loupe. I am familiar with a loupe I used back in my college days to inspect negatives. I worked as a photographer and darkroom technician for the Office of Public Affairs down at Freed-Hardeman University, and I would sometimes develop hundreds (if not thousands) of

images a week, and instead of printing all of those negatives, I would put this on my glasses, and inspect the negatives before deciding which ones to print to send to the various newspapers. It's basically a magnifying glass. It's something I would "peer" through. It is a "loupe." And, as I understand it, that's the basis of the word "loophole," a small opening we might peer through. Over time, if somebody was looking for a way to get out of something, they might refer to looking for a "loophole," the idea that you could perhaps escape through that small opening in the wall of the castle or fort. And it came to be used with reference to the law. So yes, the law says this, but perhaps there is a loophole, perhaps there is a way out. Perhaps I can crawl through this small opening. And this is what Balaam seems to be doing. God is not allowing him to curse the Israelites, but motivated by greed, Balaam is looking for a loophole, and it seems that he finds it.

I. **So, let's start by setting the stage with some passages that come later in the Bible, looking back at what Balaam does here, and it's sometimes referred to as THE COUNSEL OF BALAAM.**

Remember: Balaam's name is not found in Numbers 25, but looking back on it, this chapter has Balaam's name written all over it. He doesn't actively participate in what happens here, but he's the one who devises the plan. What we are about to study is all Balaam's idea. I know we're looking at this a bit backwards, but the first clue comes a few chapters later, in Numbers 31. As the people prepare to cross the Jordan, God commands them to wipe out the Midianites (a name describing a number of groups in this area), and in addition to killing the five kings of Midian (including Balak), Moses (the author of Numbers) also tells us that they kill "***Balaam the son of Beor with the sword.***" The soldiers, though, bring back the women as captives, and Moses is irate. It's the women who were the operatives in this plot, so Moses has them executed as well, and he explains in Numbers 31:16, "***Behold, these caused the sons of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, so the plague was among the congregation of the LORD.***" And this is our first clue that Balaam is behind what happens in Numbers 25.

Beyond this, we also have a few references to Balaam in the New Testament, including that passage we looked at a few weeks ago in the message to the church in Pergamum in Revelation 2:14, where Jesus says, "***But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of sexual immorality.***" So, we learn here that the "***teaching of Balaam***" involves putting stumbling blocks in front of people so that they worship idols and commit sexual immorality.

We also have a reference in 2 Peter 2:14-16, in a long list of terrible traits describing false teachers, Peter says that these men, "***hav[e] eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children; forsaking the right way, they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; but he received a rebuke for his own transgression, for a mute donkey, speaking with a voice of a man, restrained the madness of the prophet.***"

Then, we also have a brief reference in Jude 11, where Jude also refers to false teachers, who "***...for pay...have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam.***" These men have entered the congregation undercover, they are "***hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever.***"

We take what we learn from these later references, and we conclude that whatever happens here in Numbers 25 happens as a result of Balaam, motivated by greed, giving some advice (counsel) to King Balak. He cannot curse Israel directly, but he finds a work-around, a loophole. And what we are about to see is that Balaam, knowing that God is a jealous God and knowing that God keeps his word, if God's people can be tempted to participate in some curse-worthy behavior, God will basically do the cursing for him. Most of Deuteronomy 28 is a series of curses that will come upon the people if they are not faithful to the covenant. So, knowing that God's promises to the Israelites are conditional, Balaam is using God's faithfulness as a weapon and for his own personal gain. The people are the weak link here. This is the counsel of Balaam – motivated by greed, convincing or tempting others to sin.

II. So, let's go back to Numbers 25, and let's notice what happens, and we are summarizing this with the words SIN IN THE CAMP.

And remember: As far as we know, the Israelites have no idea what has been going on behind the scenes here. As far as we know, they have no idea how hard Balak has been trying to Balaam to curse them. As far as they are concerned, they are just out here camping, minding their own business, waiting to cross over the Jordan River. They're just camped out – cooking, and doing laundry, and washing dishes, and waiting. They have no idea the kind of spiritual warfare that's going on behind the scenes. Doesn't this pretty much describe us? Living our lives, minding our own business, having no idea the kind of spiritual warfare going on behind the scenes? By the way, I should probably point out that this whole incident with Balaam actually takes up more space in the Bible than the entire conflict with Pharaoh 40 years earlier. This should tell us something about how serious this is. Balaam's advice to the king of Moab probably comes closer than just about anything to derailing God's plan to bring his people into the Promised Land. Let's pick up, then, with Numbers 25, remembering that everything we are about to read is done based on the advice of Balaam – Numbers 25:1-18,

¹ While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. ² For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. ³ So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor, and the LORD was angry against Israel. ⁴ The LORD said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of the people and execute them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel." ⁵ So Moses said to the judges of Israel, "Each of you slay his men who have joined themselves to Baal of Peor." ⁶ Then behold, one of the sons of Israel came and brought to his relatives a Midianite woman, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, while they were weeping at the doorway of the tent of meeting. ⁷ When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he arose from the midst of the congregation and took a spear in his hand, ⁸ and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and pierced both of them through, the man of Israel and the woman, through the body. So the plague on the sons of Israel was checked. ⁹ Those who died by the plague were 24,000.

¹⁰ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹¹ "Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned away My wrath from the sons of Israel in that he was jealous with My jealousy among them, so that I did not destroy the sons of Israel in My jealousy. ¹² Therefore say, 'Behold, I give him My covenant of peace; ¹³ and it shall be for him and his descendants after him, a covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the sons of Israel.'" ¹⁴ Now the name of the slain man of Israel who was slain with the Midianite woman, was Zimri the son of Salu, a leader of a father's household among

the Simeonites. ¹⁵ *The name of the Midianite woman who was slain was Cozbi the daughter of Zur, who was head of the people of a father's household in Midian.* ¹⁶ *Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,* ¹⁷ *"Be hostile to the Midianites and strike them;* ¹⁸ *for they have been hostile to you with their tricks, with which they have deceived you in the affair of Peor and in the affair of Cozbi, the daughter of the leader of Midian, their sister who was slain on the day of the plague because of Peor."*

Balaam's advice, then, is to send some women in to seduce the men of the leading families of Israel and then to invite them to participate in the sacrifices to their gods. And this is exactly what happens. ****PPT**** Verse 2 tells us that the people ***"ate and bowed down to their gods,"*** and verse 3 tells us that ***"Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor."*** One minute they are camping in the wilderness minding their own business, and the next minute they are doing it with pagan women and bowing down and sacrificing to their gods. The people are cheating on God. They have broken the covenant. Years later, God looks back on this (in Hosea 9:10), ****PPT**** and he says, ***"I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your forefathers as the earliest fruit on the fig tree in its first season. But they came to Baal-peor and devoted themselves to shame, and they became as detestable as that which they loved."*** Hosea uses marriage to describe the relationship between God and Israel, and here he refers back to the beginning. This is the honeymoon. They've seen God's protection and miraculous care for 40 years now, but even while they are still in the wilderness, Israel decides to be unfaithful. They are lured away by beautiful women and a good meal.

On the surface, the locals are just being hospitable! Wow, these people sure are nice! These women like us! We've eaten nothing but manna for the past 40 years, and this is some great food! Little did they know, however, that what seems to be friendly local culture is actually an attack on the core of what they believe. Doesn't that happen today? We look around us, and we get sucked in by all this world has to offer, sometimes forgetting that falling in love with the world is compared to committing adultery against the Lord. As James says in James 4:4, ***"You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."*** The men of Israel are falling in love with the world here. They certainly don't recognize this as a plot of Balaam. They don't see this as the spiritual warfare it really is. Instead, they fall for it. They have sex with these women, and they participate in the worship of Baal. This, by the way, is the first reference to God's people worshiping Baal. And unfortunately, it is the first of many references. And I would just note here: The men do not pull these women into the worship of Yahweh, but the women pull the Israelites into the worship of Baal. It's interesting how that works, isn't it! In verse 3, we find that Israel ***"joined themselves to Baal."*** These men are ***"unequally yoked"*** with these pagan women. They are getting pulled along by the neck. Or, more accurately, we might say that they are getting pulled along by the belt in this scenario. They go from sex, to food, to the worship of idols. By the way, Satan knows this is a strategy that works. Often, sexual sin leads to something else. We think of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Samson, and King David, and so on. So many times, sexual sin leads to something else. There's the temptation, and then sin, and then more sin. And here, this is not random. These men don't know it, but these women are on a mission. They have been sent by the king, in response to the advice given by Balaam.

And not only do these men fall for Balaam's plot, but as a plague descends on the camp, as people start dying left and right, and as the people are mourning in the tent of meeting, a prominent Israelite man brings one of these women home to meet the family. And based on the wording here, some have suggested that he has brought her back to the family tent to have relations with her right there. I would compare this to somebody celebrating at one of those candlelight vigils the night after 9/11 – completely inappropriate! Brazen! And this leads us to what happens next...

III. ...as we come to GOD'S JUDGMENT on this situation.

Because, as we see this man bring this woman into the solemn assembly for the purpose of perhaps showing her off to his family before taking her into the back bedroom, we find (down in verse 14) that the man is the son of a prominent leader. Sometimes, the children of powerful officials think they can get away with things that others cannot. Does that ever happen today? Absolutely! And that's what Zimri does. He walks right in with this woman, thinking he can get away with it. He's flaunting her in this solemn assembly.

What Mr. Zimri didn't count on, though, was a man by the name of Phinehas. Phinehas is an Egyptian name, probably named by his parents when he was born into slavery Egypt. As I understand it, the name itself originally referred to "someone from the south" (as in, south of Egypt), but over time, since those who lived south of Egypt were dark-skinned, the name Phinehas came to refer to someone with black or bronze-colored skin. This would have been Aaron's grandson. We studied Phinehas and his role in this back in December 2019, so we won't spend too much time on this part of it. We have some rather graphic artwork on this, some images that just barely made it by my filter. But based on the way this is worded, we are thinking that when Phinehas sees these two head into the back room, he stands up, follows them in there, and spears them both through the guts, as they are in the middle of it. There's no delay, no warning, no arrest followed by a lengthy trial, no judge, no jury, he doesn't ask permission, there's no discussion of any kind, but Phinehas sees what is happening, and he almost instinctively does what needs to be done: Immediate death, a zealous and decisive response. God is being dishonored, and Phinehas makes it stop. I'm reminded of David as a teenager, when he sees Goliath taunting God's people. He's there to deliver some cheese (here in Wisconsin we need to know these things – one of the few references to cheese in the Bible). But David sees Goliath taunting God's people, and he is moved to do something! In the same way, Phinehas takes care of this.

And he takes care of it in a way that Moses himself was apparently unwilling to do. You might have noticed that God told Moses to kill all of the leaders, Moses gives the command to just kill those directly involved (so, he seems to back off of God's original command a bit), and even this doesn't seem to be done immediately. There is a pause for some reason. And in the meantime, this Zimri guy walks in. Phinehas takes care of it, and in response, God stops the plague, but not before 24,000 have died. Without Phinehas, Balaam's scheme might have worked, and the Israelites never would have entered the Promised Land.

Before we leave this passage, let's understand that God puts his stamp of approval on what happens here. And this is important, especially since this happens so quickly and since Phinehas acts alone. There's no "badge-cam" on this one. Phinehas has put himself out there on this one. I'm reminded of what happens when a cop makes a split-second decision, and then the lawyers, and the media, and everybody else literally have YEARS to second-guess that decision. But we notice, starting in verse 10, that God steps in and praises Phinehas here. Phinehas is held up as an example. God is basically saying: Do it like this guy did it! Phinehas is ***"jealous for his God and makes atonement for the sons of Israel."*** He does this, not because he doesn't like these two people, but because they are disrespecting God. Phinehas stops the sin from spreading. In this sense, Phinehas has been described as something of a forerunner of Jesus – he puts himself at risk and makes atonement for the sins of the people. What he does is even praised in the Psalms. The people sang about this for generations. Psalm 106 tells the story (starting in verse 28),

²⁸ ***They joined themselves also to Baal-peor,
And ate sacrifices offered to the dead.***

²⁹ ***Thus they provoked Him to anger with their deeds,***

And the plague broke out among them.

***³⁰ Then Phinehas stood up and interposed,
And so the plague was stayed.***

***³¹ And it was reckoned to him for righteousness,
To all generations forever.***

Phinehas, then, is praised elsewhere in scripture, not just here.

The rest of God's wrath is carried out in Numbers 31, that passage I quoted from earlier. Once they regroup, Moses organizes an army of 1000 men from each of the twelve tribes, and they are given the mission of wiping these people off the face of the earth. Originally, God had told them to leave the Moabites alone, but the enemy has persisted, and now it is finally time to end this. And Phinehas seems to be put in charge of this battle.

Conclusion:

This morning, we have looked at Balaam's loophole. Although he tried, God would not allow him to curse Israel; but, he found another way. Knowing that God is a jealous God, and knowing that God's covenant is conditional on the obedience of the people, Balaam bypasses God and goes after the people directly. What he failed to do through sorcery, he tried to do through temptation, through sex and food. So, what do we learn from this? We learn that if Satan can't get us one way, he will keep trying until he finds a weakness. So what? What does this mean for us?

I want us go back to God's take on this in verses 10-13, because in these four verses, God uses the word "jealousy" four times. It's a word referring to zeal, anger, or passion. What Phinehas does here is an act of God-approved jealousy. And just as God is zealous for us, it's clear from this passage that God appreciates the same attitude from us. He wants us to protect the relationship. And so, we are not to be ignorant of the fact that the enemy is always trying to bring us down, and we react by fighting back. We don't give in to temptation, but we push back against it.

The New Covenant certainly doesn't encourage us to go around spearing people, but knowing what we know now about Balaam's loophole, maybe we see sin sneaking up on us. We open our eyes to the spiritual battle going on behind the scenes. We see the temptation coming. Maybe it's not a full-frontal attack, but maybe it's the pull of the world. Maybe it's one temptation that tries to sneak in through the back door disguised as a financial decision, "It really makes sense to move in with my girlfriend, because housing is really expensive in Madison right now." There's a lot of truth in that statement. And yet, when we see that temptation coming, we need to recognize it for what it really is, and we need to put an end to it. We need to spear it, so to speak. Not today, Balaam! Or maybe we see sin sneaking up on a friend. We see it coming, but they don't. Godly jealousy speaks up and says something. Others might be thinking it, but others might be cowards. Be Phinehas in that situation. In all things, be different. Be holy, just as God is holy. Let's read the manual so that we can be angry about the same things that make God angry. Be like David and Jesus. Be like Phinehas.

Let's close today with a reminder from Paul in Colossians 3:1-5, where he says,

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your

life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. ⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

When sin sneaks up on us, we put it to death. We go to war with it. We do what Phinehas would do. We might not win every battle, but we keep fighting. We don't give in to it, but we call out to God for help, and we keep fighting. Satan knows our weaknesses, he doesn't fight fair, but we still keep fighting. As we are about sing, we "Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin; each vict'ry will help you some other to win; fight manfully onward, dark passions subdue; look ever to Jesus, he will carry you through. Ask the Savior to help you, comfort, strengthen and keep you; he is willing to aid you, he will carry you through." And this is how we overcome the counsel of Balaam.

And this brings us to the end of our study. Last week, I just briefly mentioned how I can't believe we're doing a 5-part series of lessons on Balaam. And yet, over the past few weeks, I've also realized that although we are studying Balaam, we are not really studying Balaam. We are studying the danger of being motivated by money. We are studying the danger of stubbornly insisting on our own way. We are studying the importance of being faithful, even when we are not appreciated (like the donkey). We are studying the power of God's word – when he blesses, he blesses. And today, we've looked at how important it is to open our eyes to spiritual realities and to put up a fight against sin. So, I am thankful for request that led to this series, and I'm thankful for the opportunity to have studied this interesting character over the past few weeks.

I am thankful to Josh for preaching next week. I will be speaking at the Minnesota Bible Lectures next Saturday. This might not be the best week to visit Minneapolis, but I hope you will be praying for me as I'm there.

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

Our Father in Heaven,

You have been so good to us! As we look at the damage Balaam caused in Numbers 25, we pray that we would learn from it. We pray that you would give us the courage of Phinehas as we struggle against sin. Help us to encourage each other. Keep us from temptation. We pray that we would always find the way out that you have promised. Give us the wisdom to find it and the courage to take it.

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

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com