

"God's Word Overrules All Other Words"

Numbers 23

The false prophet Balaam's attempts to curse Israel, under the employment of the King of Moab, Balak, reveal two opposing ideas. To curse someone is to wish harm on them through the power of your words. To bless someone, is to desire good for them. To bless people the way God blesses is to speak words of well-being in order to produce God's good in their life.

The bible begins with this theme. The book of Genesis is all about blessing and cursing. It starts in creation when the enemy influences Adam and Eve to sin and as a result, a curse is now upon humanity (death enters the picture), and on the created world (cursed with weeds, thorns, plagues and drought) that hinders the productive blessing that God wants to produce through it. As people multiply, they sin more, the consequences of the curse cause people to harm each other. So much so, that God decides to remove all of mankind outside of Noah's family, and starts over again issuing the same original command, to be fruitful and multiply. In other words, to be a blessing not a curse.

Yet in Genesis 3:15 God promised that the world would not remain cursed, that a seed from the woman, who, while being significantly hurt by the serpent (who strikes His heel, a crippling blow), yet will deal a fatal blow to the serpent's head. Thus lifting the curse from humanity, if they believe by faith in God's Words that the curse no longer separates them from God. To reject God's Words to bless us through Christ and try to find your own way out from the curse will fail.

In Num. 23-24, King Balak believes that words have the power to curse and bless if you get a spiritual intercessor (Balaam) to appease the gods through sacrifices and Divination who will empower you to speak cursing or blessing words which will hinder them or empower them. But Balaam is the wrong intercessor, who is dabbling in the demonic realm to receive words that will harm God's people. God is sovereign and overturns Balaam's evil intentions to produce life empowering words for Israel.

Proverbs reminds us of the power of words:

12:18 Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. 19 Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment. 20 There is deceit in the hearts of those who plot evil, but joy for those who promote peace.

There are three applications I want us to seek to work on in our own life and to think more seriously about from this chapter. The first one comes from Balak himself.

To Desire Ill Will Toward Others, is Evil **(23:6-7, 11-15, 25-30)**

To hurt people with our words is not righteous or godly. Therefore it is evil. There is only righteousness and wickedness. There is no in-between in life. We think of "evil" as things that are really, really bad. But that's not God's assessment. Listen to Heb. 3:12 written to followers of Christ:

Heb. 3:12 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

Believers are being warned not to be deceived by sin (we all still sin) which is going against from God and His good desires for us. And we are to encourage each other (how? With words) so that we aren't hardened by sin's deceitfulness. Sin deceives us because it has an alluring, joy-in-the-moment feeling. It deceives us because in our use of hurtful words we rationalize that we are right or that someone deserved our harsh words. Jesus died for every sin, including the evil, harmful words that we speak to bring people down.

Balak wanted to bring Israel down first, through words and then through military might. He wants to hurt them because he is afraid of them. Remember, this from 22:4

This horde is going to lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field.

He presumes they will overpower them and destroy them. But we've already pointed out his desire to curse Israel (and our own desire to hurt others with words) is

Done out of fear (v.11)

In v.11 Balak calls Israel 'his enemies'. Up until now Moab has no historical interaction with Israel. Yet there is a very interesting prophecy sung by Moses' sister Miriam when Israel crossed the Red Sea in Ex. 15,

Ex. 15:13 "In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling. ¹⁴ The nations will hear and tremble; anguish will grip the people of Philistia. ¹⁵ The chiefs of Edom will be terrified, the leaders of Moab will be seized with trembling, the people of Canaan will melt away; ¹⁶ terror and dread will fall upon them. By the power of your arm they will be as still as a stone— until your people pass by, O Lord, until the people you bought pass by. ¹⁷ You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance— the place, O Lord, you made for your dwelling, the sanctuary, O Lord, your hands established. ¹⁸ The Lord will reign for ever and ever."

People hurt other people because of fear. They may say damaging things because they are afraid of being shown as weak or false. They may say damaging things because they have listened to lies about others and misjudged them. We can all be guilty of speaking negatively about people based on misinformation or lack of information. Did Balak know the words of Ex. 15? We don't know, but we do know they came true. When Joshua sent the two spies to Jericho (less than a year away from this passage) remember what Rahab said of Israel?

Josh. 2:9 I know that the Lord has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. ¹⁰ We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. ¹¹ When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

While Balak himself did not believe in God and it's easy to say he was doing evil, let's be careful that we think we are incapable of doing evil just because we are believers.

Eph. 4:25 Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. ²⁶ "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷ and do not give the devil a foothold. ... ²⁹ Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Balak refuses to give up when his first attempt fails. He tells Balaam, let's choose another place (v.13) where you can't see as many of them, as if changing locations will trick God. And they build 7 more altars with expensive animals, using the pagan idea that the god reacts to the greater sacrifices or efforts or money ... will manipulate him to your will. Balak is relentless in his desire for evil and all that does is

Relentless efforts reveals a hard heart (vv.13-14, 27-30)

Balak does not give up even after the 2nd time Balaam comes back and blesses Israel. In vv.27-28 Balak takes Balaam to another place to see if this is agreeable for God to curse Israel. And builds 7 more altars with 7 more expensive sacrifices. Why 7? We don't know for sure but perhaps they have heard that 7 is special to God, thus the 7 altars and sacrifices. God isn't swayed because we prayed 7 times. God isn't moved more to answer our prayers favourably because we give more or prayed wearing a prayer shawl or wear a cross around our neck. This is all pagan superstition customs that creep into our practices. Balak is hardened towards God and not open to hearing what Balaam is actually saying about Israel and God. People who want Israel's destruction or Christian's destruction rarely listen to logic or God's Words because their hearts are hard. Let's learn from a pagan king to keep our hearts soft. Repenting of our sin, calling it what God calls it. Let's think before we speak. Let's speak life words more than harmful words. Our words wound and Satan knows it. He loves to demoralize us and make us lead ineffective lives.

Therefore, we need to believe and repeat over and over again what God says about us. Here's another application for us:

If God Says You're Blessed, then You're Blessed! **(23:8-10, 19-24)**

God gives these life-strengthening words to Balaam:

⁸ How can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced? ⁹ From the rocky peaks I see them, from the heights I view them. I see a people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations. ¹⁰ Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my end be like theirs!"

God won't curse Israel because He can't!

He keeps His covenants (vv.7-9, 19-20, 24)

God has chosen to bless Israel and He hasn't altered His Words and changed for the church. God set them apart from the other nations not because they are righteous, because He sovereignly chose to. He also sovereignly chose to bless the church, the mystery Paul calls us that wasn't revealed to the prophets in the Old Testament, that now includes believing Jews and Gentiles. But God's covenant through Abraham, and David and Jeremiah still hold true.

The world hates Israel and Jesus followers because God has chosen them. That's the reason. But as Paul says in Rom. 9 to Christians who wondered if God's plan for Israel has changed, he says not at all. But he does say just because you are an ethnic Jew doesn't mean you are a true son of Abraham, who was right with God because He believed God's words to do to Israel through him would happen. Rom. 9:6,

⁶ It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. ⁷ Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." ⁸ In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring

The only Israelites who will experience the future covenant blessings of God are those who believe by faith that God's words are the words of life. Which includes that Jesus is their Messiah and they no longer need to look for one. Some Christians misunderstand this and wrongly think every Israelite has access to God. That is not true. The only people (Jew or Gentile) who have access to God are those who have placed their faith in Jesus. Salvation has always been by God's grace through faith in His words.

God keeps His promises to all His people. If God says we're saved, we're saved. If God says we are blessed, we are blessed. But that doesn't keep the enemy from attacking us not that he does it alone. Sometimes our own fears and doubts cripple us into thinking God's Words aren't true. We also see here from Numbers the reminder that

God comforts those who are promised (vv.10, 21-23)

What an interesting phrase that came out of Balaam's mouth in v.10

¹⁰ *Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel?*

God comforts His people through this verse in two ways. The 'dust' of Jacob is a reference to the covenant promise God made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants that they will be as numerous as the dust in Gen. 13:16

Gen. 13: ¹⁵ All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. ¹⁶ I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. ¹⁷ Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you."

God reminds Israel through a pagan prophet that His promises will come true even if at the moment they don't look that way. We don't live by sight but by faith. The other comforting part is the eternal rest promised to God's people. Balaam (actually God puts these words in his mouth)

Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my end be like theirs!"

Paul used David as an illustration of the assurance of salvation in Rom. 4 through the forgiveness of our sins.

⁶ David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ⁷ "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. ⁸ Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him."

If we wrongly think we can lose our salvation by some sin we commit as a believer, then we are saying we doubt that Jesus died for every sin. That His death was insufficient.

In Balaam's second oracle, God's blessing comforts His people again:

²¹ *"No misfortune is seen in Jacob, no misery observed in Israel. The Lord their God is with them; the shout of the King is among them. ²² God brought them out of Egypt; they have the strength of a wild ox. ²³ There is no sorcery against Jacob, no divination against Israel. It will now be said of Jacob and of Israel, 'See what God has done!' ²⁴ The people rise like a lioness; they rouse themselves like a lion that does not rest till he devours his prey and drinks the blood of his victims."*

No misfortune or misery doesn't mean they wouldn't experience any of that, but what he means is more along the lines of Rom. 8, that just as no misfortune or miserable experience can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, no misfortune or miserable experience can separate righteous Israel from God's covenant promise. In v.23, Balaam ironically says, no sorcery or divination can change God's words. Instead, he says get ready to see what God is going to do when they get in the land.

The third way I'd like to apply this passage is to look at Balaam as God's chosen spokesperson and apply how God uses him to ourselves in our context. While God used Balaam to be His spokesperson, we are His true spokespeople, and how does God communicate His truths through him?

Help People Who are Unknowingly Cursed to Find God's Blessing **(23:1-5, 16-18, 26)**

Who are those under a curse in Num. 23? Balak and Balaam and the Moabites. They are totally clueless that they are living under the curse of sin and separated from the only true God, Yahweh, the God of Israel. Balak is afraid of being wiped out by God's people but it never enters his mind to know this God. God is witnessing to them through His words, by planting His words in Balaam's mouth to speak to Balak. Balaam is witnessing to them!! What can we learn from how God uses Balaam to share His truths, for us to share His truths who actually believe them?

Ask Him for the words to share (vv.5, 12, 16-18, 26)

Over and over we read that God gave Balaam the words to speak. If God can do that to a pagan prophet, can He not give us His words to share who believe them? We have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. Jesus said in John

^{14:26} *But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*

The things that Jesus had said. That means we have to read and hear what Jesus says in His Word now for the Spirit to bring these to our mind. We have to give Him something to work with. We can't put our bibles under our pillow and say 'Spirit, do your stuff!' We are responsible to listen to God and Jesus' words, paying attention to them, learning them, memorizing them and seeking to apply them. If it's the Spirit's job to remind us of what the Word says, then we should be asking Him to do that very thing.

V.12 should not be a fridge verse! Or v.26

Must I not speak what the Lord puts in my mouth?"

Did I not tell you I must do whatever the Lord says?"

Another way we can apply this to ourselves when asking God for wisdom to witness is don't just think about where you should go with the gospel, but start

With those whom God has brought into your life (vv.6, 17)

It is ironic that Balaam was living his own life in Pethor far, far away from Moab, until God sovereignly arranges the visit from Balak's men to come and this is what God uses to reveal the truth that he's the only true God and His Word prevails over the words of kings and demonic beings. God uses Balaam to be His spokesmen not to just Balak but look at vv. 6 and 17

⁶ So he went back to him and found him standing beside his offering, with all the princes of Moab.

¹⁷ So he went to him and found him standing beside his offering, with the princes of Moab

God has arranged for all these leaders of a nation to hear His Words – words that can free them from being under the same curse everyone is under, sin. He brought Balaam to them so they could hear the message from God.

Who has God brought into our life? Who do you work with, go to school with, play sports with, live beside or work where you shop or get your coffee? Does it ever dawn on us that God is bringing us to these people in the routines of our day to graciously help them know they are under a curse that they don't know they are under? Witnessing has to start where we live. The apostle Paul said to the lost Greeks in Athens who were clueless they were under the curse of sin, why he was there:

^{17:26} From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. ²⁷ God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ 'For in him we live and move and have our being.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message, please
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