

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## The Parables of Balaam: Numbers 23:18-24

Poor Balak, the first part of his scheme didn't work out! As we heard in our last talk, he had sent for Balaam to put a curse on the armies he was so afraid of. His confidence in the famous soothsayer must have been badly shaken. Balaam had done the very opposite to what Balak wanted. He wasn't able to curse these armies; he had blessed them. Just listen to Balak, *"What hast thou done unto me? I took thee to curse mine enemies, and, behold, thou hast blessed them altogether"* Numbers 23:11.

### A more limited view

In spite of this setback, Balak goes on and suggests that they go to another place to see the armies of Israel: *"Thou ... shalt not see them all: and curse me them from thence"* (Numbers 23:13). Was he so foolish as to think that if they took a more limited view of God's people that would make any difference? How very little these two men really knew of God!

### The unchangeable God

The question we have raised is answered by Balaam a few verses down the chapter. Let's listen to Balaam's words. *"God is not a man, that He should lie; neither the son of man, that He should repent: hath He said, and shall He not do it or hath He spoken, and shall He not make it good?"* (Numbers 23:19)

Just think of these words coming from this wicked prophet, Balaam. Let's just forget this incident for a while and relate these words to ourselves. God will always remain faithful to His word. There are times when circumstances press in upon us and our faith in God weakens and we become depressed. We should not forget the unchangeable God. What He promises to do, He will fulfil! The Apostle Paul, in Romans 11:1-28, writes of the unfaithfulness of Israel. He goes on to say that as far as God's promises to them were concerned, *"The gifts and calling of God are without repentance"* (Romans 11:29). Just think again of Paul's words in another place, this time directly concerning Christians, *"In hope of eternal life, which God that cannot lie promised before the world began"* (Titus 1:2). We need in our day to rest entirely upon God's word.

### A justified people

In last week's talk we were thinking of God's people as sanctified, that is, as set apart for Himself. Let's recall the expression, *"The people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations"* (Numbers 23:9). God's love was set upon them. In this parable another truth comes to light. Listen to the next part of this second parable! *"He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath He seen perverseness in Israel"* (Numbers 23: 21). Just take account of that! Was there ever a people who had tried God's patience like Israel? The very fact that it took forty years for them to travel from Egypt to where they were now, speaks loudly. It was because of their unbelief. On another occasion, had it not been for the intercession of Moses, they would have been wiped out. We read in Hebrews 3:17, *"But with whom was [God] grieved forty years? Was it not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness?"* It was a new generation that encamped in the plains of Moab. The only two who had left Egypt and entered the land of Canaan were Caleb and Joshua (Joshua 3).

Think again of these words. I am going to quote them again! *"He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath He seen perverseness in Israel"* (Numbers 23:21). This is how God saw them. It is not now God's "sanctified people", it is His "justified people". They were as perfect as God could make them. Although the word justify is found in the Old Testament, it is really a New Testament truth. It is based on the death and resurrection of Christ. It is at the very heart of the Christian faith.

However, leading up to these parables, there are two experiences which Israel passed through. As Christians, we are able to see them as pictures of the Lord's death. The first of these was at the time of their release from bondage in Egypt (Exodus 12:1-28). They had spent 400 years there under severe servitude and cruelty with very little hope of freedom. Pharaoh was a hard taskmaster. There came a point when the Israelites cried out for freedom from this servitude and God heard them. Moses and Aaron were appointed by God to approach Pharaoh with the call, *"Let my*

people go" (Exodus 5:1). There was very little hope of this happening at first. However, sent by God, several plagues were inflicted upon the land of Egypt, increasing in their severity (Exodus 7:14-10:29). Pharaoh was at times so affected by them that he agreed to let the people go. But when the plague was removed, his heart was hardened and he refused to let them go free.

Eventually, when all had failed, the most severe judgement of all fell on the Egyptians. The firstborn in all the land of Egypt was to be killed (11:1-10:12:30). The firstborn of Pharaoh, of the servants, and of the beasts. It was to happen at midnight (Exodus 11:4). Instructions were given to the Israelites as to how to deal with this last plague (Exodus 12:1-28). They were involved in this as much as the Egyptians. It was to be a new beginning in their national history. They were to take a lamb out of their flocks and kill it and take of the blood and put it on the two side posts and on the lintel of the door of their houses (Exodus 12:3-7). It was very important that this was done! God said, *"When I see the blood, I will pass over you"* (Exodus 12:13). Death did not enter the houses of the Israelites because they were covered by the blood. Pharaoh was now very glad to let them go (Exodus 12:31-32). They were set free from their bondage at last! What a remarkable picture it is of redemption by blood. This may help us to understand how it was that God was able to say, we repeat the words again, *"He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath He seen perverseness in Israel"* (Numbers 23:21). Let's just think of ourselves in our day. The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesian believers, *"In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace"* (Ephesians 1:7). Can you put yourself into this verse?

In Numbers 21, the chapter just before Numbers 22 that records the plot hatched between Balak and Balaam, Israel passed through an experience which is another picture of the cross of Christ. We usually refer to it as the "Brazen Serpent" (Numbers 21:4-9). Our interest in this incident is increased because of the conversation recorded in John 3:14-16 between the Lord Jesus and Nicodemus. Let's listen to the Lord's words on that occasion: *"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life"* (John 3:14-15). We are not left in any doubt as to the meaning of Israel's experience at that time.

It happened because of the complaints of the people (Numbers 21:5). God in His care for them had fed them for forty years with manna. Never was there a day when there was no food. There was no manna, of course, on the Sabbath Day, but they were given double rations on the day before to last over the Sabbath (Exodus 16:22-26). This is what they said! *"for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread"* (Numbers 21:5). They were an ungrateful people! God was angry with them and sent fiery serpents among them that bit them and many of them died (Numbers 25:6). When the people confessed their sin, Moses prayed that God would take away the serpents (Numbers 21:7). Although they were totally undeserving, immediately the remedy was found (Numbers 21:8-9). What a God they had! He was full of mercy and compassion. We in our day should be thankful that God is unchanged. Listen to the New Testament, *"But God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved)"* (Ephesians 2:4-5). The remedy lay in the serpent set upon a pole (Numbers 21:8-9). All who looked lived! The serpent on the pole was a replica of that which had caused such havoc in the camp. The Israelites couldn't understand, as we do, the real meaning of this. Let us be thankful then that we can see, in this incident, the cross.

It is in the letter of Paul to the Romans where we read of justification (Romans 1-8). The subject is brought to its conclusion in Romans 8. We notice that it was a serpent to which the people who were bitten must look in order to live. It was the fiery serpents which brought death. Romans 8 begins like this, *"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus"* (Romans 8:1). How can this possibly be? Paul goes on to write, *"...God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh"* (Romans 8:3). What a wonderful deliverance! Who would have thought of this? Later on in Romans 8 a question is asked, *"Who is he that condemneth?"* (Romans 8:34) There is no one because, *"It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God..."* (Romans 8:34). Maybe we can understand in this picture form how Balaam could not curse the people of God. They were covered by the blood; they had looked at the serpent lifted up. We must remember, however, that these pictures were merely shadows. Christians have the substance and are cleansed by the precious blood of Christ and we are justified and outside any fear of accusation.

### God with them

This second parable continues further, *"the LORD his God is with him"* (Numbers 23:21). They were a favoured nation. It wasn't long after they left Egypt, that God said, *"Let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them"* (Exodus 25:8). It was left to the people to provide the materials for this dwelling place. They were to be willing hearted in their giving. This was the tabernacle (Exodus 26:1-37). Most of us have possibly heard about this. It was a very interesting building. The structure was of boards of acacia wood (Exodus 26:15-25), and draped over the boards were four curtains (Exodus 26:1-14). The inner curtain was actually called the tabernacle and the other three were coverings. Inside this building was an area known as the holiest of all (Hebrews 9:3). No one was allowed to go in there except the High Priest, and that only once a year (Hebrews 9:7). There was some furniture inside: there was the

ark (Exodus 25:10-16), the mercy seat (Exodus 25:17) and on each end of the mercy seat were cherubim of gold (Exodus 25:19-21). In between these two cherubim God dwelt (Exodus 25:22). His presence was indicated by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21). God guided His people in all their movements across the wilderness.

It was always God's intention to dwell with men, and it still is. The church is God's dwelling place today. These are the words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians: *"In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit"* (Ephesians 2:22). This dwelling place of God was formed on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given (Acts 2). So all Christians have part in the house of God. We must get away from thinking of the church as bricks and mortar. The Apostle Peter says, *"Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ"* (1 Peter 2:5). Worship is the privilege that belongs to all those who make up this house. There is also a manner of life that is suitable to the house of God. Psalm 93:5 says, *"...holiness becometh Thine house, O LORD, for ever"*. The same message comes through in the New Testament. In Paul's first letter to his son in the faith, Timothy, there is a call for godliness. On one occasion Paul writes of *"doctrine which is according to godliness"* (1 Timothy 6:3). Whatever teaching there would be, godliness must be the end product.

## Royal

The next expression in this second parable is, *"and the shout of a king is among them"* (Numbers 23:21). Let's think about this! There might be a future bearing here. In the last section we thought of believers as a holy priesthood, offering up spiritual sacrifices to God (1 Peter 2:5). However, this refers to "the shout of a king". This is royal, isn't it? In 1 Peter where we are said to be a holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:5), we are also called a royal priesthood. What do they do? Here it is, *"that ye should shew forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvellous light"* (1 Peter 2:9). Here we have another privilege! It is also a witness going out to others, telling of all that God has done for us.

## Redemption

The parable then goes back to Israel's redemption. *"God brought them out of Egypt"* (Numbers 23:22). They were never to forget that memorable day! Reading through the Old Testament we find this. The prophets were constantly reminding the people of Israel of it. Even in the New Testament it comes up. In the book of Acts we have the account of the defence of Stephen to those who were baying for his life (Acts 7:1-54). You may remember that he did lose his life at the end of his defence. He reminds his Jewish audience of their rescue out of Egypt. *"[God] brought them out, after that he had shewed wonders and signs in the land of Egypt..."* (Acts 7:36). Do you remember when you first trusted the Lord Jesus for salvation? You came under the shelter of the blood! It was a new beginning! Israel's end is that they will overcome all their enemies: *"he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn [buffalo]"* (Numbers 23:22). The Christian's end is also sure.

## A generous God

In Numbers 23:23, Balaam concludes, *"Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, neither is there any divination against Israel"*. The plot had failed. But notice the question which is now raised! *"What hath God wrought?"* (Numbers 23:23) Every happiness marked out for mankind had its source in God's heart. When the Lord Jesus talked with the woman of Samaria (John 4:1-42), He referred to God as the giving God. Nothing is ever held back. He gave His Son! He gives eternal life! He gives the Holy Spirit! Think again of Romans 8! *"If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"* (Romans 8:31-32)

As we bring this broadcast to an end, isn't it remarkable that Balak still prefers to plod on in his wicked intentions? He was getting desperate by now. *"Neither curse them at all, nor bless them at all"*, he tells Balaam (Numbers 23:25). So they decided to go to another place (Numbers 23:27). In our next talk we will see what becomes of this. Balaam knew very well what the result would be. Maybe he still hoped for a reward. Let's remember the leading point in this second parable! Israel was a justified people. So are we today, *"Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus"* (Romans 3:24). May we all be a rejoicing people as well!

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