

ENEMIES FRUSTRATED – PROMISES KEPT

Numbers 22-24

John Steinbeck once observed!

*“If a story is not about the hearer he will not listen.
A great, lasting story is about everyone or it will not last.
The strange and foreign is not interesting –
only the deeply personal and familiar.”*

Today, God’s Word in *Numbers* has a story that’s about us. Especially if you are someone whose life depends on the absolute reliability of God’s promises.

But to understand the story, we need to set it up. First, **SETTING**. 1406 B.C. Some 3,415 year ago, God’s redeemed and now wilderness-hardened people, are finally finishing their 40 year wander. Like “Wow!”, right? 40 years of wandering because at a decisive fork in the road, in fear they chose to distrust and disobey God rather than take an obedient step of faith. It cost the 40 years, and it cost them hundreds of thousands of grandparents and parents whose graves littered the sands of Sinai.

But now, a new national generation is moving north, like a vast human blanket, around Edom (the descendants of Esau) and *through* Moab, to get in position: to follow God; to enter with Him in the battle for their land – a land promised a half-millennium ago to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob forever.

But there is someone who wants to stop them in their tracks even before they get started.

Which leads, **SECONDLY**, to **the CHARACTERS** – 4 of them.

- **Balak:** the King of Moab, who is teaming up with the Midianites, to stop Israel
- **Balaam:** a Mesopotamian prophet, originally from *Pethor*, a city on the Euphrates River. Balaam is not Jewish, he’s not even a believer or follower of Yahweh (the God of Israel). He is just a *baru*, a “priest-diviner” who offers divinations and prophecies for hire. He makes his living interpreting dreams and omens, or marshalling the demonic world to bring benefit and blessing or harm through curses. If Balaam were Haitian, we might call him a “witch doctor.”
- **Balaam’s donkey:** a beast of burden whose lot in life is to haul Balaam around where he wants to go
- **Yahweh, the God of Israel:** whose intent is to fulfill the promises made to Abraham, to this generation of Israel.

Finally, **THE PLOT begins to unfold** in Numbers 22:1-6.

Numbers 22:1 Then the people of Israel set out and camped in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan at Jericho. ² And Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. ³ And Moab was in great dread of the people, because they were

many. Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel. ⁴ And Moab said to the elders of Midian, “This horde will now lick up all that is around us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field.” So Balak the son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, ⁵ sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor at Pethor, which is near the River in the land of the people of Amaw, to call him, saying, “Behold, a people has come out of Egypt. They cover the face of the earth, and they are dwelling opposite me. ⁶ Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed.”

The **plot question** is this: Can the Moab’s King —marshalling whatever influence he can (and especially *spiritual* forces—can he successfully get in the way and derail the Lord’s promises to the Lord’s people? You ask, “**So what?** What does this have to do with me?”

Take a moment to think about it:

- For what do you depend on God?
- How important to you is the absolute reliability of His promises?
- When He says something, can he come through? When He promises something, will He deliver?

For example, how important is it to you that God has promised

- ✓ that He loves you
- ✓ that your sins can be completely forgiven and not counted against you because God the Son, Jesus Christ, paid-in-full the entire penalty your sins deserved, and that by simple faith in Christ, you have eternal life with God
- ✓ that He will never leave you nor forsake you
- ✓ (or) that nothing comes into your life except as it is first filtered by the sovereign care of your heavenly Father, and that He will cause everything to work together for the good because you love Him.
- ✓ (or) that as long as you trust Him with all your heart, and in all your ways you acknowledge him...that He will make your paths straight.
- ✓ (or) how about God’s promise that He will return *to judge the world with fairness and hold men accountable according to His righteousness (cf. Psalm 96)*

A God who says:

Is. 46:9 ...I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me,
¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, ‘My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my purpose,’
¹¹ calling a bird of prey from the east,
the man of my counsel from a far country.
I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass;
I have purposed, and I will do it.

No, for them, if the King of Moab can bring in a prophet for hire, and marshal whatever opposing forces are out there to successfully kick God’s promises off-line, shucks... we don’t have much of a God. So what happens in 1406 B.C.? The story unfolds in 6 acts (actually two sets of three).

ACT I – Balaam and God (1st Encounter)

22:7 So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the fees for divination in their hand. And they came to Balaam and gave him Balak's message. ⁸ And he said to them, "Lodge here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, as the Lord speaks to me." So the princes of Moab stayed with Balaam. ⁹ And God came to Balaam and said, "Who are these men with you?" ¹⁰ And Balaam said to God, "Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent to me, saying, ¹¹ 'Behold, a people has come out of Egypt, and it covers the face of the earth. Now come, curse them for me. Perhaps I shall be able to fight against them and drive them out.'"

12 God said to Balaam, "You shall not go with them. You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed." ¹³ So Balaam rose in the morning and said to the princes of Balak, "Go to your own land, for the Lord has refused to let me go with you." ¹⁴ So the princes of Moab rose and went to Balak and said, "Balaam refuses to come with us."

ACT II – Balaam and God (2nd encounter)

22:15 Once again Balak sent princes, more in number and more honorable than these. ¹⁶ And they came to Balaam and said to him, "Thus says Balak the son of Zippor: 'Let nothing hinder you from coming to me, ¹⁷ for I will surely do you great honor, and whatever you say to me I will do. Come, curse this people for me.'" ¹⁸ But Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the Lord my God to do less or more. ¹⁹ So you, too, please stay here tonight, that I may know what more the Lord will say to me." ²⁰ And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If the men have come to call you, rise, go with them; but only do what I tell you."

ACT III – Balaam and God (3rd encounter)

22:21 So Balaam rose in the morning and saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab.

22 But God's anger was kindled because he went, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. ²³ And the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand. And the donkey turned aside out of the road and went into the field. And Balaam struck the donkey, to turn her into the road. ²⁴ Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. ²⁵ And when the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she pushed against the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall. So he struck her again. ²⁶ Then the angel of the Lord went ahead and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. ²⁷ When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she lay down under Balaam. And Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff.

²⁸ Then 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?" ²⁹ And Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a fool of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you." ³⁰ And the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey, on which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat you this way?" And he said, "No."

³¹ 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 down and fell on his face. ³² And the angel of the Lord said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse before me. ³³ The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live."

³⁴ Then Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you stood in the road against me. Now therefore, if it is evil in your sight, I will turn back." ³⁵ And the angel of the Lord said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but speak only the word that I tell you." So Balaam went on with the princes of Balak.

Thus, we come to the end of the story's first 3 acts, to an intermission. But we have two

important questions. **The first is** "Why did God get angry with Balaam when he went with the princes

of Moab?” I mean, didn’t God tell Balaam to go? (cf.22:20). The key to understanding this is found in God’s specific instruction in vs. 20. *If* in the morning, the large entourage of princes came in humility to inquire what the Lord said to Balaam, and asked again for him to come, Balaam was to go. But what happened was that rather than waiting, Balaam simply saddled his animal and told them he was ready to go.

There was something in the heart of Balaam that was eager to go—something God saw, something that was perverse—eager to obtain the wealth at hand. His motives, it seems were mixed...so that underneath all his “God-speak” was *actually* a heart eager for the wages Balak was offering. Trying to please God and please Balak at the same time. Jewish Rabbinic commentators put it like this: *From this you see that a man is led in the way he desires to go...[and]...If one comes to defile himself, he is given an opening.*ⁱⁱ

The second question – “Did God actually make a female donkey speak to Balaam? [or did Balaam just imagine his jenny speaking?] It’s interesting, isn’t it, that the jenny could see the Angel of the Lord, but Balaam (who’s making it sound like he’s trying to serve the Lord) could not? Again it speaks to what was really the set of Balaam’s heart. Frankly, a donkey endowed with speech would come as no surprise to Israelites who understood what happened in the Garden of Eden. If Satan could empower a serpent to speak, why could not God empower a jenny (female donkey)?ⁱⁱⁱ

So Balaam – with the fear of God reinforced in his experience -- goes on with the princes, and the 2nd half of the story commences.

ACT IV – BALAAM’S 1st BLESSING (“what just happened!”)

22:41 And in the morning Balak took Balaam and brought him up to Bamoth-baal, and from there he saw a fraction of the people.

23:1 And Balaam said to Balak, “Build for me here seven altars, and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams.”² Balak did as Balaam had said. And Balak and Balaam offered on each altar a bull and a ram.³ And Balaam said to Balak, “Stand beside your burnt offering, and I will go. Perhaps the Lord will come to meet me, and whatever he shows me I will tell you.” And he went to a bare height,⁴ and God met Balaam. And Balaam said to him, “I have arranged the seven altars and I have offered on each altar a bull and a ram.”⁵ And the Lord put a word in Balaam’s mouth and said, “Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak.”⁶ And he returned to him, and behold, he and all the princes of Moab were standing beside his burnt offering.⁷ And Balaam took up his discourse and said,

*“From Aram Balak has brought me,
the king of Moab from the eastern mountains:*

'Come, curse Jacob for me, and come, denounce Israel!'

⁸ How can I curse whom God has not cursed?

How can I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced?

⁹ For from the top of the crags I see him, from the hills I behold him; behold, a people dwelling alone, and not counting itself among the nations!

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

Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his!"

¹¹ And Balak said to Balaam, "What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have done nothing but bless them." ¹² And he answered and said, "Must I not take care to speak what the Lord puts in my mouth?"

ACT V – BALAAM'S 2nd BLESSING ("let's try this again!")

*^{23:13} And Balak said to him, "Please come with me to another place, from which you may see them. You shall see only a fraction of them and shall not see them all. Then curse them for me from there." ¹⁴ And he took him **to the field of Zophim**, to the top of Pisgah, and built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each altar. ¹⁵ Balaam said to Balak, "Stand here beside your burnt offering, while I meet the Lord over there." ¹⁶ And the Lord met Balaam and put a word in his mouth and said, "Return to Balak, and thus shall you speak." ¹⁷ And he came to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering, and the princes of Moab with him. And Balak said to him, "What has the Lord spoken?" ¹⁸ And Balaam took up his discourse and said,*

"Rise, Balak, and hear; give ear to me, O son of Zippor:

¹⁹ God is not man, that he should lie,

or a son of man, that he should change his mind.

Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?

²⁰ Behold, I received a command to bless: he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it.

²¹ He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob, nor has he seen trouble in Israel.

The Lord their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them.

²² God brings them out of Egypt and is for them like the horns of the wild ox.

²³ For there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel; now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, 'What has God wrought!'

²⁴ Behold, a people! As a lioness it rises up and as a lion it lifts itself; it does not lie down until it has devoured the prey and drunk the blood of the slain."

²⁵ And Balak said to Balaam, "Do not curse them at all, and do not bless them at all." ²⁶ But Balaam answered Balak, "Did I not tell you, 'All that the Lord says, that I must do'?"

ACT VI – BALAAM'S 3rd BLESSING ("third time's a charm")

*^{23:27} And Balak said to Balaam, "Come now, I will take you to another place. Perhaps it will please God that you may curse them for me from there." ²⁸ So Balak took Balaam **to the top of Peor**, which overlooks the desert. ²⁹ And Balaam said to Balak, "Build for me here seven altars and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams." ³⁰ And Balak did as Balaam had said, and offered a bull and a ram on each altar.*

^{24:1} When Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he did not go, as at other times, to look for omens, but set his face toward the wilderness. ² And Balaam lifted up his eyes and saw Israel camping tribe by tribe. And the Spirit of God came upon him, ³ and he took up his discourse and said,

"The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is opened,

⁴ the oracle of him who hears the words of God,

who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down with his eyes uncovered:

⁵ How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel!

⁶ Like palm groves that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like aloes that the LORD has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters.

⁷ Water shall flow from his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters; his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted.

⁸ God brings him out of Egypt and is for him like the horns of the wild ox;
he shall eat up the nations, his adversaries,
and shall break their bones in pieces and pierce them through with his arrows.
⁹ He crouched, he lay down like a lion and like a lioness; who will rouse him up?
Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you.”

¹⁰ And Balak's anger was kindled against Balaam, and he struck his hands together. And Balak said to Balaam, “I called you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have blessed them these three times. ¹¹ Therefore now flee to your own place. I said, ‘I will certainly honor you,’ but the LORD has held you back from honor.”

¹² And Balaam said to Balak, “Did I not tell your messengers whom you sent to me, ¹³ ‘If Balak should give me his house full of silver and gold, I would not be able to go beyond the word of the LORD, to do either good or bad of my own will. What the LORD speaks, that will I speak’?”

Over and over again...God reaffirms His unalterable promises about His people...and to His people...their future.

WHY THIS STORY IS ABOUT US?

Like Israel, we belong to a God who loves to be trusted.

While there are people around us

- ✓ who do not want God's promises to be true
- ✓ who want to discourage us in trusting Him
- ✓ spiritual forces which work hard at trying to frustrate and block the promises of God in our lives

*When He makes a promise, He fulfills His promise –
to His people, to the world...to you.*

But, let's to be more specific. Four truth ideas --

#1 God's promises are richer, fuller, more beautiful and more encouraging than we often realize. (explore them!)

- Read the 2nd and 3rd blessings from Balaam – beautiful language of how much God loves and favors and will make successful His people
- Read chapters in Romans 5,6,8. Read Ephesians 1,2,3, Colossians 1-2, 1 Thess, etc.

#2 God's promises are meant to give us confidence when we are battling by faith. (use them)

Numbers 24:8 God brings him out of Egypt and is for him like the horns of the wild ox; he shall eat up the nations, his adversaries, and shall break their bones in pieces

Romans 16:19 For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you...Be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. *20* The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.

1 John 4:4 Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

#3 God's promises are GOD'S PROMISES – they simply cannot fail, and despite the efforts of enemies and opponents, they cannot be derailed. (count on them)

Is. 46:9 ...I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me,
¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying, ‘My counsel shall stand,
and I will accomplish all my purpose,’
¹¹ calling a bird of prey from the east,
the man of my counsel from a far country.

I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass;
I have purposed, and I will do it.

#4 God's promises are something to believe, to build your life on, and to expect a great fulfillment. (build on them)

> Start with this one from Jesus, "Whoever believes in Me has eternal life"

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ⁱ John Ernst Steinbeck, Jr. was an American author who won the 1962 Nobel Prize in Literature "for his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humour and keen social perception".

ⁱⁱ Cf. **Why Was God Mad at Balaam for Going If He Said He Could?** by Jeff Miller, Ph.D. at <https://www.apologeticspress.org/APContent.aspx?article=4829>; and Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary-Numbers* (Philadelphia/New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 5750/1990), 189.

ⁱⁱⁱ Milgrom, p.191, "These words are a satiric play on Balaam's reputed prophetic gift, for the Lord also uses Balaam's mouth as a vehicle for his message (cf. Number 22:38, 23:5,12,16). Cf. Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21-36 –The Anchor Bible Commentary Series* (Doubleday, 2000), p. 157, As is written in Exodus 4:11, "Then YHWH says to him (=Moses) "Who grants humans the power of speech, or who makes one dumb or deaf, sighted or blind? Is it not I, Yahweh?"