

Balaam's Blessing

Scripture: Numbers 23-24

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People of God: Words of blessing: How important are they? When we hear the benediction at the end of the service, do we really appreciate the significance of those words of blessing? When we hear an American politician conclude his speech by saying, "God bless America", do we quickly dismiss that as just another sign of American civil religion? When someone sneezes, do you ever respond by saying, "Bless you?" And if you do, do you really mean it?

Words of blessing. How important are they? In the pages of Scripture, words of blessing are very important. Blessing is the key part of God's covenant with Abraham, and therefore with us. In the foundational text of Genesis 12, God says to Abraham:

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.

The blessing of the Lord our God is key to the covenant promises given to Abraham and also to us. God blesses us.

Earlier in the Book of Numbers we encountered one of the keys words of blessings, words that are still used in worship:

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.

We devoted a whole message to the meaning and importance of these familiar words of blessing.

Are words of blessing important? They certainly are. And that is what is at stake in these two chapters. God turns an attempt to curse his people

into a blessing.

Last week, we saw how Balak perceived that God's people were a threat to him. As a result, he hires Balaam to curse the people. The first three attempts follow the same basic pattern:

First, Balak takes Balaam up to a high point so that he can see the people of God who are camped, in the plains by the Jordan, across from Jericho.

Second, Balak builds seven altars, at Balaam's order and offers sacrifices on them.

Third, Balaam goes off by himself to find out what he is suppose to say from the Lord.

Fourth, Balaam ends up speaking a word of blessing, rather than cursing the people.

Fifth, Balak, responds in anger, each time angrier than before.

Then finally, Balaam explains why he blessed, rather than cursed the people.

Three times, this cycle repeats itself. It mirrors to what happened between the donkey and Balaam. But with the fourth and final oracle, this pattern is completely different, revealing its importance, the climax to this entire episode. But before, we can look at the final word of blessing, we need to see how the previous three oracles lead up to it.

The first oracle, which begins at 23:7, establishes the basic setting of his words, explaining who he is and why he was there:

Balak brought me from Aram, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains. "Come," he said, "curse Jacob for me; come, denounce Israel."

That's very straightforward. But then he raises the crucial question:

How can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced?

That's the key starting point, rooted in the teachings of Genesis 12. How can anyone think they can overturn God's blessings or God's curses? Many might try. But no one can succeed. God will ensure that his blessings will fall upon his people as he desires. And that is what God has already done. Despite the constant complaining and grumbling of the people, God has blessed his people. The evidence is already before Balaam as he surveys the people camped out before him:

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

God's promises to Abraham are already being fulfilled. Their numbers are already immense. But also notice the description of the people: They live

apart. They do not consider themselves one of the nations. God's people realized that they were God's chosen nation, to be holy, with a special mission that made them different from the other nations. This special blessing made Balaam wish he was like one of them when he concludes:

Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my end be like theirs. But unfortunately for Balaam, he will not get his wish. Because Balaam ultimately turns on God's people and as a result, he dies a cursed death. If only he lived out these words.

In the second oracle, Balaam focuses on God, providing an outsider's perspective, on what God has done for his people. He begins by saying (23:18),

Arise, Balak, and listen; hear me, son of Zippor,
 God is not a man, that he should lie,
 Nor a son of man, that he should change his mind.
 Does he not speak and then not act?
 Does he promise and then not fulfill?
 I have received a command to bless;
 He has blessed and I cannot change his mind.

Balaam reminds Balak, and us, of the fundamental starting point: It's all about God and his character. God doesn't change his mind and reverse his promises. He will be true to his word. We can count on God.

And so Balaam continues to recount what God has done for his people:

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. God brought them out of Egypt. 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."

While God's people may have been complaining and grumbling through their journey in the wilderness, Balaam identifies the truth: From their deliverance from Egypt, God was watching out for them, providing for all their needs. God's people may have failed to how the Lord was with them, but outsiders noticed. God is with his people.

Now we should pay particular attention to one description of God in these verses. Balaam says, "The shout of the King is among them." This is the first time in the Bible that God is explicitly described as a King. While from the opening chapter of the Bible, there have been hints and allusions to this key description of God as King, here for the first time, it has become explicit. God is king. He is the sovereign one, ruling not just over Israel, but also over all the nations of the world.

Because God is King, he is able to fulfill his promises; he is able to shower his people with blessings. The third oracle describes those blessings in greater detail:

Like valleys they spread out, like gardens beside a river,
 Like aloes planted by the Lord, like cedars besides the water.
 Water will flow from their buckets; their seed will have abundant water.

In contrast to the wasteland (23:28) in which Balaam presently sees the people, God's people are able to enter the Promised Land, where water flows. In fact, this description echoes how the Garden of Eden was described. That's what the Promised Land represents to God's people: the second Garden of Eden. No wonder Balaam goes on to describe how God's people will be strong and powerful. God's blessings are upon them.

This leads to the fourth and climatic words of blessing. At first, it might not appear that way. After all, Balak's anger reaches its climax after the third oracle. After the third one, Balak sends Balaam back home, without paying him a penny. These departing words of Balaam seem less poetic than the first three. It contains the names of countries and places that we are unfamiliar with. As a result, they seem more distant to us.

But we need to understand what is going on. Yes, the first three are more general in nature. In this fourth one, Balaam explains how those words of blessing will work themselves out in history:

A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.
 He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Seth.
 Edom will be conquered; Seir, his enemy, will be conquered, but
 Israel will grow strong. A ruler will come out of Jacob and destroy the survivors of the city.

This why Balak wanted Balaam to stop. Balaam is getting specific. When God's people enter the Promised Land, they will become a great nation. A king will arise who will conquer Moab and other nations. In that way, God's people were a threat to Balak, though not in the way, he first thought.

Who is this star? This scepter? The first fulfillment would be King David. Under his rule, Moab and the other nations mentioned here were defeated. Under David and then Solomon, God's people experienced a golden age. But it was, of course, very short-lived and very incomplete.

As a result, these verses began to be viewed in Messianic terms. And indeed, in the NT, these references to a star and to a scepter were applied to Jesus, especially in the Book of Revelation. Some see a connection to the star of Bethlehem.

And indeed, we—God's people of today—appropriate these words of

Balaam in the light of the coming of Jesus Christ.

The first oracle spoke about the basic covenant promise of blessing. And it is in Jesus that these covenant promises are ours. Jesus is the agent of blessing in our lives. The blessings of the covenant, first given to Abraham, and reasserted here, are ours because of Jesus. Because of Jesus, God seeks to bless us.

And as the second oracle emphasizes God as King, so we too recognize Jesus as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It is because of who he is and what he has done for us through his death and resurrection that we can be blessed.

And this blessing involves enjoying a restored Garden of Eden. The third oracle spoke of the Promised Land with those images of paradise. So too, our Promised Land, is paradise regained. A restored, renewed creation.

And it's all possible, because Jesus is the star that came out of Jacob; he is the ruler who crushed the enemies of God.

And so, God does ensure the blessing of his people. Now remember that this all happens while God's people are in the camp, not knowing what is going on. They don't realize what Balak and Balaam were up to, until it was all over. It is God who ensures the blessing of his people.

In the same way, God acts to ensure our blessing, our salvation in Jesus Christ. Because that saving act, already took place long before we were born. But now in faith, we look back to Jesus' death and resurrection and know that in those acts we are blessed. Amen.