

What's the Message – Lesson 37

Today we hear the story of the talking donkey and conclude our study of the Book of Numbers.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Lord, we pray that you would open our ears and our hearts, so that we may learn from the lessons you taught our spiritual forefathers, and not have to repeat the same mistakes that they made. Help us to see that these lessons are still relevant today, and apply to us also. Amen.

Last time we saw that rejecting the gifts of God was not a good thing to do, but that trusting in His promise and doing what He wanted, was. Today we read an unusual story, about a donkey that talked. How did this all come about? Well, after they had defeated the kings of the Amorites and of the territory of Bashan, the people of Israel backtracked and returned south to the plains opposite Jericho.

Now, it was the people of Moab who were in fear of the Israelites, and they turned to their southern neighbors, the Midianites, for help. We read in chapter 22 that they offered a fee to a man there who had a reputation for divination, for telling the future. His name was Balaam, and the plan was to get him to curse the people of Israel so that the king of Moab might possibly defeat Israel in battle.

At first, Balaam was instructed by God not to participate in this plan, for He had blessed Israel, not cursed them. So Balaam gave an initial response that he could not comply with the request. This naturally disturbed the king of Moab, and he offered to increase the fee. Again, Balaam turned to God for direction, but this time was told . . . *If the men have come to call you, rise, go with them; but only what I bid you, that you shall do.*

Now we have the unusual story of the talking donkey, the donkey that sees the angel of the Lord barring the way, and turns aside. But Balaam cannot see the angel, and gets angry at the donkey's behavior and beats it. Two times the donkey leaves the trail and the third time it lies down. After the third beating, the donkey's mouth is opened and it asks Balaam "What have

I done to you that you have struck me these three times?” Then Balaam’s eyes are opened and he sees the angel in all its awesome power.

The conclusion of the angel’s conversation with Balaam is: *Go with the men; but only the word which I bid you, that you shall speak.*

Now, remember that the whole purpose of this event is that the King of Moab has hired Balaam to curse Israel, in the hopes that Moab might be able to defeat Israel in battle.

So, in chapter 23, Balaam tells the king to build seven altars, and to offer seven bulls and seven rams on these altars. Following this, Balaam would speak what the Lord instructs him to say. Three times this is done, at different locations, and each time instead of a curse, Balaam offers praise to Israel. As you can imagine, the King of Moab is more than just a little displeased, and refuses to pay Balaam what had been offered. They part, but not until Balaam has told the king what was to happen to his people “in the latter days” at the hands of the Israelites.

There is one more event that we need to add to our story. While the Israelites remained encamped in the high plain area opposite Jericho, chapter 25 tells us: *the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab.* The following verses go on to tell us more about how the Moabite women seduced the all-to-willing Israelite men to participate in their ritual worship of the fertility-god, Baal.

As you might expect, the Lord was not at all pleased, and instructed Moses to have all the men who had “yoked themselves to Baal” killed as the way to stop the plague that had come upon the people of Israel. Nevertheless, thousands of Israelites died here because of their sin of rejecting Yahweh and turning to Baal.

And with that, Teacher, we have a summary of a couple of key events here at the end of the Book of Numbers. But what does it all mean to us today? What is the message we should take from this?

Yes, they are two very strange and interesting events. But they both are part and parcel of one major theme that we have laid out . . . beginning early in this course in lesson six and the line of Seth. It is the theme of selection and separation, and we have built on this

theme with Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph and the separation of the people of Israel from the Egyptians in the land of Goshen. Now we have seen this theme broaden from involving one or two persons, to involving the whole nation, when God said to Moses in Exodus, chapter 19, *you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.* Once again, I need to remind our listeners that the word “holy” has two meanings; it is not just our typical concept of perfection, but it also means “set apart.”

Yahweh has chosen the Israelites to be His people, and set them apart for His purposes. He has blessed Israel, therefore Balaam cannot be allowed to curse them, and can only speak what God directs him to say. At the same time, Israel must be faithful to God and reject all false gods. They had promised at Mt. Sinai to keep the first commandment, to worship Yahweh alone . . . now they must actually do it. Why? Because as the Book of Numbers concludes with this final point from Moses in chapter 35: *You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the Lord dwell in the midst of the people of Israel.*

Are we not in the same position as Israel was? Does this lesson not apply to us as equally as it did to them? Do we want God to dwell in our midst? Then He must be first in our lives, and we must reject all false gods also.

Next time we shall move into the Book of Deuteronomy, and the sermon of Moses.