

Numbers Chapter 22 – The Way of Balaam

The New Testament warns against following the “way” of Balaam, the “error” of Balaam, and the “doctrine” of Balaam. This lesson will be on the “way” of Balaam.

Read Numbers 22:1-6

The Moabites were descendants of Lot and his older daughter (Gen 19:37). Their language was Hebrew, with some dialectical differences. They were not Canaanites, and were not among the peoples God destined for wrath by Israel’s hand (Deut 2:9-11). Balak was king of Moab around 1200 B.C. They had a neighbor relationship with Israel in the years to come, sometimes friendly and sometimes not, and they were still around during Roman times. But they were a wicked people. Chemosh was their national deity, which was honored with perverse practices like child sacrifice.

The Midianites were descendants of Abraham through his second wife Keturah. They were nomadic tribes. Joseph was sold to Midianites. When Moses fled Egypt after killing a soldier, he lived in Midian and married a Midianite woman. But they worshipped a multitude of gods including Baal-Peor and Ashteroth. In the time of the Judges, Gideon was strengthened to defeat them.

Balaam was a famous seer and diviner. He lived near the Euphrates River and may have been Syrian.

Read Numbers 22:7-19

God’s first answer was His perfect will. How did Balaam modify it when repeating it to the elders? How did they modify it when repeating it to Balak? Is it any wonder Balak sent more messengers, this time princes, who were more honorable. What do they offer (vs 17)? What image arises in Balaam’s mind instead (vs 18)?

vs. 19, why does Balaam need to sleep on it? He had God’s answer. What has changed that he thinks God’s answer should be different? How often do we pray the same way? We pray for direction when we’ve already decided.

Read Numbers 22:20

What we see here is the permissive will of God. He does not overcome our free will by force, and sometimes permits us to follow our own path although it is not His perfect will. Another example of this was when God permitted Israel to send spies into the promised land before they went in to war. We know from Deuteronomy that that wasn’t God’s plan, but He permitted it. His anger burned only after they used the spies’ report as an excuse to disobey.

Consider God’s warning to Balaam. How does it apply to our behavior? Does God allow us to “go” but not to sin? Is there a better path?

Read Numbers 22:21-33

Balaam, the renowned prophet, the seer, the magician, has less discernment than his donkey! From their conversation, the donkey was one Balaam had known a long time, and she had never spoken before. When confronted by the sign and miracle of a talking donkey, what should Balaam have done? But only after the angel revealed itself, sword in hand, did Balaam relent. What does that tell us about the usefulness of signs? Read Matthew 16:4

vs 32 What reason does the angel give for blocking Balaam’s path? The meaning for the Hebrew clause used here is uncertain. Certainly, it is a description of Balaam’s “path” or “way.” The ESV says it was “perverse” the NASB says “contrary,” and the NIV says “reckless.” What meaning is captured here? **Read 2 Peter 2:1, 13-17.** This is “the way of Balaam,” pursuing profit instead of God, regardless of the warning signs.

How often do we ignore the warning signs that we are on the wrong path? Does God ever block our path? What should our response be?

Read Numbers 22:34-35

What does Balaam say before God allows him to move on? Why do you think the angel does not accept Balaam’s offer of turning back? He sends him on with the same warning as before.

Read Numbers 22:36-41

Balak has paid Balaam for his “prophecy,” and takes him to a high place overlooking the Israelite camp. Notice that Balaam receives meat offered to idols and that the mount is the location of an altar to Baal. Do you think Balak is expecting Balaam to deliver an oracle in accordance with God’s will, or in accordance with his own will? Why?