

Balaam
Numbers 22:2-21; 23:4-13; 24:15-19

Introduction

One thing is known about Balaam – the story of an ass speaking to him. Who he was, what he did and the significance of his life is little known. Balaam was a Gentile with some knowledge of the God of Israel. King Balak of Moab was afraid of the Children of Israel. He had heard of their exploits and feared for himself and his kingdom. So he asked the prophet Balaam to put a curse on Israel in return for reward and honours. Balaam was willing to do so, but time and again he was forbidden by God. God had blessed His people and therefore Balaam was forbidden to curse them because they were under God's protection.

Lessons from the character of Balaam

On the outside there is much that is inspiring and attractive about Balaam. He was one of several Gentiles read of in the Old Testament, outside of the house of Israel. He was raised up to witness to God and His truth. In succession of Melchizidek and Jethro, he was a divine witness to the profane land where he lived. He was a man greatly gifted of God. We see gifts in his unusual powers, his prophecies, prayers and exhortations, and in his orthodoxy. **If Balak would give me his house full of gold and silver I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God to do less or more** (Numbers 22:18). You could not get better than that!

He uttered prophecy about the coming of Christ, calling Him **a Star out of Jacob** (Numbers 24:17). And he prayed **Let me die the death of the righteous** (Numbers 23:10). He taught the sound doctrine of God. **God is not a man that He should lie.. Hath He not said and shall He not do it? According to this time it shall be said of Jacob and of Israel, 'What hath God wrought?'** (Numbers 23:19,23). He spoke of the attributes of God as clearly as any theological textbook – His holiness, purity, power and faithfulness. He prayerfully sought the will of God. **Tarry ye also here this night that I may know what the Lord will say unto me more** (Numbers 22:19). He had an all night prayer session seeking the Lord's will.

Yet all the time, he was playing and dallying with sin. **Balaam who loved the wages of unrighteousness** (2 Peter 2:15), **The error of Balaam for reward** (Jude 11). He knew he ought to obey God but he was hoping to find some way of getting round the problem. He hoped that God would change his mind. He claimed that he wasn't concerned with gold and silver, yet he was anxious to get his hands on them. He was held back only by a sordid fear of God. Each time Balak asked Balaam to curse Israel, he was thrown backward and forward by a "shall I or shaln't I?" attitude. Deep down there was no sincerity and no honesty about him. There was no resolute once for all refusal to listen to Balak, with all his preaching and prayers. Underneath it all, he had his price, and Balak knew that, hence he kept asking his aid.

His true colours were eventually exposed. He persuaded Balak and his people to seduce the people of God by means of certain immoral rites. **Balaam, who taught**

Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel (Revelation 2:14). The children of Israel were led to sacrifice to idols and commit fornication. Balaam blessed Israel in words, but encouraged Israel to sin. His religion was intellectual and outward, not moral and inward. It never reached his heart and conscience. In the end, far from dying the death of the righteous, Balaam was slain with the sword.

This is an alarming picture. Here is a man with gifts of prophecy, who was powerful and orthodox, and yet beneath it all he was an impostor and full of deceptions. What a warning to men in Christian work. Alexander Whyte said this passage should be taken note of by all divinity students before they receive their licence. Fine natural gifts, great learning and eloquence in the pulpit may be but shining whitening on the surface of a sepulchre. The official excellence in a minister may go side by side with secret corruption. **Many will say to me in that day, Lord, have I not prophesied in Thy name, and in Thy name have cast out devils and in Thy name have done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you** (Matthew 7:22,23).

But this is not only a word of warning to the Christian preacher and leader. It widens to all who profess to be Christians. There are examples of other solemn warnings in Scripture. Judas, called to be a disciple, heard Jesus' teaching first-hand, witnessed His miracles, accompanied Jesus on His ministry, heard Him confessed as Christ and Son of the Living God, and yet he was the son of perdition, who betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, and then went out and hanged himself. Then there was Demas, who **hath forsaken me having loved this present world** (2 Timothy 4:10), and others who professed to be followers, **They went out from us but were not of us** (1 John 2:19).

The whole purpose of 1 John was to bring tests, not to outsiders, but to professing Christians – to those claiming orthodoxy (in the church to which John was writing they claimed to be super-Christians!), saying right things, using Christian language. Tests of new birth – real inward change of heart, love for the righteous, love for the will of God, seen in deed and truth. **Hereby we do know that we know him if we keep his commandments** (1 John 2:3). The direction of his life is towards God and towards holiness. **Whosoever is born of God does not commit sin** (1 John 3:9). Yes, we all sin, but the test is whether or not there is deliberate and habitual sin which is welcomed and enjoyed. Sin must not be the policy of life. **He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also so to walk as he walked** (1 John 2:6).

Balaam's attitude to death

Let me die the death of the righteous and let my last end be like his (Numbers 23:10). That wish could not be bettered. But it was not realized in Balaam's case. He knew it would be terrible to die in his sins, but he did not cease from sinning. He expressed pious wishes, but there was no faith and obedience. We die as we live. To die the death of the righteous we must live the life of the righteous.

We all will die, unless the Lord returns – saved or unsaved, believer or unbeliever. The righteous man will die with a quiet conscience. In the event of death the mind is often quickened to a high degree of activity. Drowning people have felt as if they were in the water for weeks though actually just for seconds, because their thoughts

and views and long retrospect of their lives, in that space of time, seemed very detailed. How tragic for the man who looks back over his life in his dying moments, and sees a life wasted, lived for himself and his own ends, youth filled with folly, middle life with sin, and old age of iniquity. Terrible to be haunted by sins of the past when about to be carried into the presence of God, with all the memories of opportunities of salvation missed.

Happy the man who can look back over life in which Christ was accepted, a life lived and served for God. That makes a soft dying pillow. Memory of days of worship, gatherings around the family altar, children pointed to Christ, the wanderer won from folly, the needy one succoured and helped. The righteous man does not lose all. For the unrighteous, death is the end of present seeming wealth and beginning of eternal poverty, but no believer is bankrupted by the grave. His treasure is in heaven. He goes to the place where that wealth is stored. Death is gain to the believer. Rowland Taylor described himself as joyful and merry, as though going to a banquet.

The believer dies in the arms of a friend – though not necessarily a mortal friend. Some have been burnt at the stake, or rotted to death in a dungeon. Yet still in the arms of the best of friends – the **Friend that sticketh closer than a brother** (Proverbs 18:24). This is often reflected in the glowing countenance, beaming eyes and memorable words of the dying. Canaan's happy land is in view, and they glimpse something of the glory to be revealed. D.L.Moody, "Heaven opens, earth recedes. It is beautiful. If this is death it is sweet. No valley here. God is calling me and I must go."

How sorrowful to die expecting fearful judgement. The godly man dies with honour. Who cares about the death of the unbeliever apart from a few friends or family? The Christian man or woman, however humble, is long remembered for their godly life, how they helped those in need, instructed those in ignorance, comforted those in distress. Like Stephen, great lamentation was made over him.

Once a carping infidel said to a poor country yokel, "You are so stupid, nothing can get you out of this absurd religion of yours." The reply was profound – "We are probably stupid, but we poor people have two strings to our bow. If it turns out as you say, that there is no God and no hereafter, I am as well off as you. It will not be any worse for me if we are both annihilated. But suppose I am right – what will become of you?"

D.L.Moody, "Some day you will read in the papers that D.L.Moody is dead. Don't believe a word of it. At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now. Out of this old clay tenement into a house which is immortal and which cannot be touched by death. Born of the flesh in 1837. Born of the Spirit in 1856. That which is born of the flesh may die, but that which is born of the Spirit will live for ever."

Conclusion

Balaam is a character to challenge us. He was orthodox and outwardly correct, but inwardly he was away from God. Yet he made a very true statement about death – that the death of the righteous is to be desired.

But the words of Balaam do direct us towards God. He called Him the Star out of Jacob, and the Sceptre out of Israel. He spoke of Him as governor and conqueror. He spoke of the Father's brightness, and His utter holiness and sinlessness. That God is a pattern of constancy. There are many changes in the world, but not in the stars. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. He is the source of our guidance, and He leads us to salvation and peace.