From Eden to Bethlehem: The Curse that Became a Blessing
Numbers 22-25:3; 31:16

We're four weeks into *Eden to Bethlehem*, tracing Jesus' family tree through the Old Testament. We've seen God be faithful to bring life and redeem life with Adam and Noah. We've seen God be faithful to His promise with Abraham, where God alone walked between the pieces and signed both sides of the covenant. And last week we saw God be faithful in grace, working through a family full of deception and betrayal: Jacob, who became Israel, and Judah, the brother who sold Joseph and later offered himself in Benjamin's place.

We ended last week with Jacob's blessing over Judah in Genesis 49. Judah is a lion. The scepter will not depart from him. A King is going to come from this line.

This week, that family is in danger. Not from inside the family this time, but from a hostile king who wants them wiped out. And we're going to see that **God is faithful to protect the family He promised to bless.**

Here's the setting. A lot of time has passed since Genesis. Jacob's family went down to Egypt, grew into a nation, became slaves, and God brought them out through Moses. Then came 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Now that older generation, the ones who left Egypt, has died, and a new generation is camped on the plains of Moab, on the edge of the Promised Land, ready to go in.

I want you to think about the words people have spoken over you. Some of them were good: a parent who said "I'm proud of you," a coach or a teacher who saw something in you before you saw it yourself.

Some of them weren't. "You'll never amount to anything." "You always mess things up." "People like you don't change." Maybe nobody said it out loud, but you felt it. And if we're honest, some of those words still rattle around in our heads years later.

Words have weight. The people throughout scripture believed that more than we do. They believed a curse spoken by the right person could actually bring destruction on whoever it was spoken against. That's why kings would pay good money to have one spoken over their enemies.

This morning we're going to look at a story where a king tries to do exactly that. He hires the most famous "curse for hire" in the region to speak a word of destruction over God's people. And the question underneath the whole story is the same question I want you to sit with: **Who gets the last word over your life?**

Balak Sends for Balaam:

Read Numbers 22:1-6. Balak is the king of Moab, and he is scared. He has watched what Israel did to the nations around him, and now this huge crowd is camped right on his doorstep. In verse 4 he says that people will lick up everything around them like an ox licks up the grass of the field.

Moab descended from Lot, Abraham's nephew. So Balak is, in a distant way, family. The family God promised to bless through Abraham is now being threatened by a branch of Abraham's own family tree.

Balak doesn't think he can win this fight with an army. So he goes looking for a spiritual weapon. He sends for Balaam.

Balaam was a sorcerer, someone people called on to place curses on others. Belief in curses and blessings was common in Old Testament times, and sorcerers were thought to have

power with the “gods”. So Balak's plan is to use Balaam's power with the God of Israel to put a curse on Israel, hoping that by magic, that Balamm’s gods were more powerful than Israel's God. Neither Balak nor Balaam had any idea who they were dealing with.

Read Numbers 22:9-12. Now this raises a question: why would God speak to a sorcerer like Balaam? God had a message for the Moabites, and they had already chosen Balaam. So Balaam was available for God to use, much like God used Pharaoh to accomplish His will in Egypt.

Look at what God says in verse 12. That should be the end of the story. God has spoken. Israel is blessed. But Balak doesn't take no for an answer.

Read Numbers 22:15-19. Balaam says all the right things in verse 18. It sounds great but look at verse 19. He tells them to stay the night so he can ask God *again*. God already gave him the answer. Why ask again? Because the money was pulling on him.

Balaam had some knowledge of God, but not enough to give up his magic and turn to God with his whole heart. He was a man ready to obey God as long as he could profit from it. Later on, Peter describes him as the one "who loved gain from wrongdoing"

Read 2 Peter 2:15. Jesus warns us about this kind of person.

Read 7:21-23. Just because Balaam spoke with God, and God used him, doesn't mean Balaam was *of* God. You can't just call on God. You have to do the will of God.

The Donkey:

God lets Balaam go, but He is angry about Balaam's greedy attitude. Balaam claimed he wouldn't go against God for money, but his resolve was slipping, and his greed was blinding him to how God was trying to stop him. This is where we get one of the most famous scenes in the Old Testament.

Read Numbers 22:22-31. Balaam, the great spiritual expert, the man kings pay to talk to the gods, is out-argued by his donkey.

First God opened the donkey's mouth, then He opened the prophet's eyes. **The donkey had more awareness of God than the prophet did.** Balaam was so focused on the reward at the end of the road that he couldn't see God standing in the middle of it.

Peter says the donkey *"restrained the prophet's madness."* Read 2 Peter 2:16.

That encounter kept Balaam in check, so that he would only speak over Israel what God gave him to say. The angel tells him in verse 35, *"Go with the men, but speak only the word that I tell you."* And if God can use a donkey to teach a lesson, He can use a false prophet to accomplish His will and protect His people.

God's Protection:

So Balak takes Balaam up to a high place where he can look down on Israel's camp. They build seven altars and offer a bull and a ram on each one. Balak is ready. He's paid for his curse. And Balaam opens his mouth…

Prophecy 1: Israel is blessed:

Read Numbers 23:7:10. *"How can I curse whom God has not cursed?"* (v. 8). And then in verse 10: *"Who can count the dust of Jacob?"* Where have we heard that before? Genesis 13:16 where God told Abraham He would make his offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, they could count his offspring. The man hired to curse Israel is quoting God's promise to Abraham back to the king and Balak is not happy.

Read Numbers 23:11-12. So Balak moves Balaam to a different spot.

Read Numbers 23:13-14. New hilltop, new view, seven more altars, seven more bulls, seven more rams. Maybe a change of scenery will change the outcome. But changing your location doesn't change God's will.

Prophecy 2: God does not lie or change His mind:

Numbers 23:18-24. Verse 19 is one of the great verses in the Old Testament. Two weeks ago, we read Hebrews 6:18, that it is impossible for God to lie. Here it is again, coming out of the mouth of a hired sorcerer. What God says, He does. Centuries later, the prophet Malachi reminded Israel that the only reason they hadn't been destroyed was that God does not change . He stays true to His holy and merciful character no matter what.

Malachi 3:6. Then verse 20: *"He has blessed, and I cannot revoke it."* And verse 24 describes Israel rising like a lioness and a lion. That ties right back to last week, to Jacob calling Judah a lion's cub in Genesis 49:9.

At this point, Balak is so frustrated he says in verse 25, *"Do not curse them at all, and do not bless them at all."* In other words, "Just stop talking!" But he still won't give up and moves Balaam a third time, to the top of Peor.

Prophecy 3: Those who bless will be blessed:

Read Numbers 24:1-9. Notice verse 1. Balaam doesn't go looking for omens this time, the way a sorcerer normally would. Verse 2 says the Spirit of God came upon him. It was clear that God Himself was speaking.

Then verse 9: *"Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you."* That's Genesis 12:3, God's call of Abram, word for word in meaning. And it's Genesis 27:29, Isaac's blessing over Jacob. Balak has spent all this money trying to curse Israel, and the curse he paid for just landed on himself. Balak loses it again.

Read Numbers 24:10-11. Whatever Balaam's motives were, in that moment he acted with integrity. God's message so filled him that he spoke the truth, and it cost him the reward that had lured him there in the first place.

Prophecy 4: A Star out of Jacob:

Read Numbers 24:15-19. Now Balaam sees something far beyond the plains of Moab. Verse 17: *"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel."*

A scepter. Where have we seen that? Genesis 49:10, last week: *"The scepter shall not depart from Judah."* This is a King, and the star out of Jacob is often understood as pointing to the coming Messiah.

Now fast forward to Matthew 2:1–2. Wise men from the East show up in Jerusalem asking, *"Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star."* Many believe it was Balaam's prophecy that set the magi on their journey to find the baby Jesus.

Think about that. One of the clearest pictures of the coming King in the books of Moses came out of the mouth of a pagan sorcerer, hired by a hostile king, standing on a hilltop trying to curse the very family that King would be born into. God can use anything or anyone to accomplish His plans.

As far as the text tells us, Israel is down in the valley, going about their lives, setting up tents, feeding their kids, and they have no idea that up on the hilltop a king is paying a sorcerer to destroy them. And God is turning every word around before it ever leaves Balaam's mouth.

Moses tells them about it later. Read Deuteronomy 23:5.

Israel's protection didn't come from their military strength. It didn't come from their righteousness either. It came because God loved them, and God had made a promise.

Some of you have no idea how many times God has protected you from things you never even saw coming. You'll find out someday. Until then, here's what you can stand on: No one can curse what God has blessed.

The Plague:

You would think the story ends there. Balak goes home angry. Balaam goes home broke. Israel is safe. But turn the page.

Read Numbers 25:1-3. Right after all of this, the men of Israel begin to get involved with the women of Moab, and those relationships pull them into worshiping Baal, the most popular god in Canaan. Baal was the god of the rains and the harvest, and his worship included some pretty bad stuff. Israel would be drawn to Baal over and over throughout their years in the land.

But why? Where did this come from?

Read Numbers 31:16. It was Balaam's idea. The same Balaam who had just blessed Israel and appeared to be on their side. Jesus brings it up again in Revelation 2:14. *"Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality."*

The first-century historian Josephus records Balaam's advice to Balak this way. *Balaam essentially admits that no war, plague, or famine could ever completely destroy the Hebrews, because God's providence was set on preserving them. So if Balak wanted any kind of victory, the only way was to get Israel to turn from their God on their own, so that God would be angry with them.*

That's the strategy. Balaam couldn't curse Israel, so he taught them how to curse themselves. It's a pattern you can trace through the entire history of Israel: God's people could never be destroyed from the outside. The real danger was always being drawn into sin against God from the inside.

The result was a plague, and 24,000 people died in Numbers 25:9. That is a hard verse but understand what's happening: God was protecting the family line He had chosen from being completely taken over by evil. Time and time again, the people would let that influence in and begin turning from God, and each time God would bring consequences to clear the evil out and protect the family through whom the Messiah would come.

As for Balaam, he chose Moab's money over Israel's God. When Israel went to war with Midian, Balaam was killed with the sword in Numbers 31:8. He knew the truth. He spoke the truth. He just never surrendered to it.

The Curse That Became a Blessing:

Let's bring this back to Bethlehem. Balak wanted a curse spoken over God's family. God turned it into a blessing, and in the middle of that blessing, He gave a glimpse of a Star out of Jacob, a King with a scepter, from the line of Judah.

When that Star finally rose, when Jesus came, He did something even more amazing than turning Balaam's curse around.

Read Galatians 3:13-14. On the plains of Moab, God turned the curse away from His people. On the cross, Jesus took the curse onto Himself. It's the same thing we saw in Genesis 15, when God walked between the pieces alone and said, "If this covenant is broken, I'll take the penalty." He did. And the blessing promised to Abraham, that all the families of the earth would be blessed, now reaches you and me.

So let's go back to where we started. Who gets the last word over your life?

It's not the coach who said you'd never make it. It's not the voice in your head that replays your worst moments. It's not whatever the enemy is whispering from the hilltop. If you are in Christ, God has already spoken over you, and what He has blessed, no one can curse.

But here's the warning from Numbers 25: what God has blessed, no one can curse, but you can still walk away from it. The enemy can't take your blessing from you. His only strategy is to get you to hand it over. So guard your heart. Be careful who you listen to.

For those of you who have never put your trust in Jesus, the Star out of Jacob came for you. He became the curse so you could receive the blessing. That's not a maybe. That's a promise from the God who is not a man, that He should lie.

And for those of you who already know Him: walk out of here knowing that the God who protected Israel in the valley is watching over you too, even in the places you can't see.

Reflection Questions:

- Balaam said all the right things about not going against God for money, yet he kept asking God the same question hoping for a different answer. Are there areas in your life where you already know what God has said but keep looking for another answer?
- Israel likely had no idea that a king was paying to have them cursed while God was turning that curse into a blessing. How does it change your perspective to know God may be protecting you from things you never see?
- Balaam couldn't curse Israel from the outside, so he led them to turn from God on the inside. What influences in your life could be slowly pulling you away from God? What would it look like to guard against them?
- Jesus said to judge teachers by their fruit and to build our lives on the rock by putting His words into practice. What is one way you can move from hearing God's Word to doing it this week?