

The Error of Balaam



Teaching Letter
By Derek Prince

Before you engage with the content of this teaching letter, it would be valuable to familiarize yourself with the record in the Bible of the story of Balaam:

- Numbers 22–25
- Numbers 31

At first glance it might seem that the story of Balaam, the soothsayer, recorded in Numbers 22–25 has no relevance for today's Christians. However, the writers of the New Testament refer to Balaam in three separate passages always with a note of warning. Clearly, therefore, his story contains important lessons for Christians.

Balaam is a strange and intriguing personality—a baffling combination of supernatural spiritual gifts and corrupt character. Significantly, we see more and more ministries in today's church with a similar combination of spiritual gifts and corrupt character.

The story of Balaam opens with Israel finally encamped on the border of Canaan. Their presence inspired fear in Balak, the king of Moab, whose territory bordered on the Israelites' encampment. Apparently he viewed the Israelites as a threat to his kingdom, although they had done nothing to justify his fear.

Feeling unable to confront Israel in battle, Balak decided to use spiritual weapons against them. He sent some of his princes—with a fee for divination in their hands—to call for Balaam to come and put a curse on Israel. As a "soothsayer" (fortune teller or witch doctor) Balaam had the reputation of uttering blessings or curses with a powerful effect for good or evil.

Balaam came from Pethor in Mesopotamia. He was not an Israelite. Yet he had a direct personal knowledge of the one true God. When Balak asked him to curse Israel, he replied, "I could not go beyond the word of the Lord my God" (Numbers 22:18). The English form, "the Lord" (in capitals), is the accepted translation of the Hebrew sacred name of God, rendered either "Jehovah" or "Yahweh." Balaam knew God by His sacred name and called Him "my God." When the emissaries of Balak arrived, God told Balaam not to go with them and not to curse Israel (Numbers 22:12).

Balak's response was to send a larger party of more honorable princes—with the promise of a much greater reward. This time the Lord gave Balaam permission to go on

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one condition: *if the men come to call you* (Numbers 22:20).

There is no record, however, that the men did come to call Balaam again. Yet he went, and by his disobedience incurred the anger of the Lord, who opposed him on his journey and nearly killed him. Finally, however, the Lord released him to go, but set the condition: "Only the word that I shall speak to you, that you shall speak" (Numbers 22:35).

Balak welcomed Balaam and made the most elaborate preparations for him to curse Israel. But each time the result was exactly the opposite. Altogether, Balaam uttered four prophecies which are among the most beautiful and powerful revelations in Scripture of God's irrevocable commitment to bless Israel.

Thwarted by God in his attempt to curse Israel, Balaam proposed a different strategy against them (see Numbers 31:16). If the Moabite women could entice the Israelites into idolatry and immorality, it would not be necessary to curse them. God Himself would bring judgment upon them. Balaam's second strategy succeeded and 24,000 Israelites perished under God's judgment (Numbers 25:1–9).

In all of this Balaam displayed the most amazing inconsistency. More than once he had been explicitly forbidden to curse Israel. By supernatural revelation he had four times affirmed God's unchanging purpose to bless Israel and to judge their enemies. But he stubbornly persisted in cooperating with Balak, the enemy of Israel, and in plotting Israel's destruction. It was certainly fitting that he should perish in the same judgment as the other enemies of Israel, executed by the Israelites together with the kings of Midian (Numbers 31:8).

We are led to ask ourselves: What motive could be so powerful and compelling that it would cause Balaam to act in direct opposition to the revelation he had received from God—to his own ultimate destruction? Two writers of the New Testament give a clear and specific answer to this question.

Speaking of false teachers in the church, Peter says:

> ... they have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness. ... (2 Peter 2:15)

Jude likewise, speaking of false teachers, says:

> They have run eagerly in the error of Balaam for profit. ... (Jude 11)

The answer is clear. Balaam was tempted to his destruction by the love of money. For this he was willing to prostitute his marvelous spiritual gifts. Probably he was flattered, too, by the attention he received from King Balak and his princes. The love of money is closely associated with the desire for popularity and for power. All these evil lusts grow out of the selfsame soil: *pride*.

Lessons from Balaam

There are three important lessons that we need to learn from the story of Balaam.

First, Almighty God has made an irrevocable commitment to establish the Jews as His people forever. There is no power in the universe, human or satanic, that can ever annul this commitment. The Jews have many times been unfaithful to God, and He has brought severe judgments upon them, but their unfaithfulness can never annul God's faithfulness.

It is important to see that the initiative in this proceeds from God, not from men. The Jews did not choose God, but God chose the Jews. I have a young friend, a former Muslim—let us call him Ali—who was supernaturally converted to Christ. After his conversion he began to bring up before God all his complaints against the Jews. Eventually God responded, "Ali, your problem is not with the Jews. It is with Me. I am the one who chose them." That young man now has a ministry winning Muslims for Christ and teaching them to pray for the Jews.

In Numbers 24:9 Balaam's prophecy reveals a decisive factor in the destiny of men and nations. Speaking to Israel, he says:

> Blessed is he who blesses you, And cursed is he who curses you.

Individuals and nations alike determine their destiny often without being aware of it by their attitude to the Jews. Those who bless are blessed and those who curse are cursed.

Second, one of Satan's strongest and most successful weapons against us is the love of money. This has been true from the earliest days of Christianity until now. A ministry accompanied by powerful supernatural signs especially miracles of healing can almost always become a means of making money.

In 2 Corinthians 2:17 Paul contrasted his ministry with that of many of his Christian contemporaries: "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit" (niv). Even in Paul's day many Christians were using their ministry to make money!

Money in itself is not evil. It is not necessarily sinful to be wealthy. By nature, money is neutral. It can be used either for good or for evil. But when we begin to love money, then we are caught in Satan's snare. In 1 Timothy 6:9–10 Paul uses the most solemn language to warn us against this:

> But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

In my own ministry I have often taught on God's plan to prosper believers who are committed to the purposes of His kingdom. Yet looking back now, I regret any occasion on which I taught this message without balancing it with Paul's warning here in 1 Timothy 6. In my mind's eye, I picture believers who have succumbed to the love of money as people who have taken a sharp, poisoned dagger and plunged it into their own flesh. Certainly this is what Balaam did.

Third, we need to understand the difference between spiritual gifts and spiritual fruit. Gifts represent ability, but fruit represents character. A gift comes through a single brief impartation, but fruit comes through a slow process of development.

Receiving a spiritual gift does not, in itself, change a person's character. If a person was proud or unreliable or deceitful before receiving a spiritual gift, that person will still be proud or unreliable or deceitful after receiving it.

Receiving such a gift does, however, increase a person's responsibility, because it increases the influence he can have on others. It also carries with it a temptation to see "success" in the Christian life in terms of exercising spiritual gifts rather than in terms of developing a godly character. Paradoxical as it may seem, the more gifts a person receives, the more attention he needs to pay to cultivating fruit. When we pass from time to eternity, we will leave our gifts behind, but our character will be with us forever.

That Balaam had a clear vision of the blessed end that awaits the righteous is shown by his prayer:

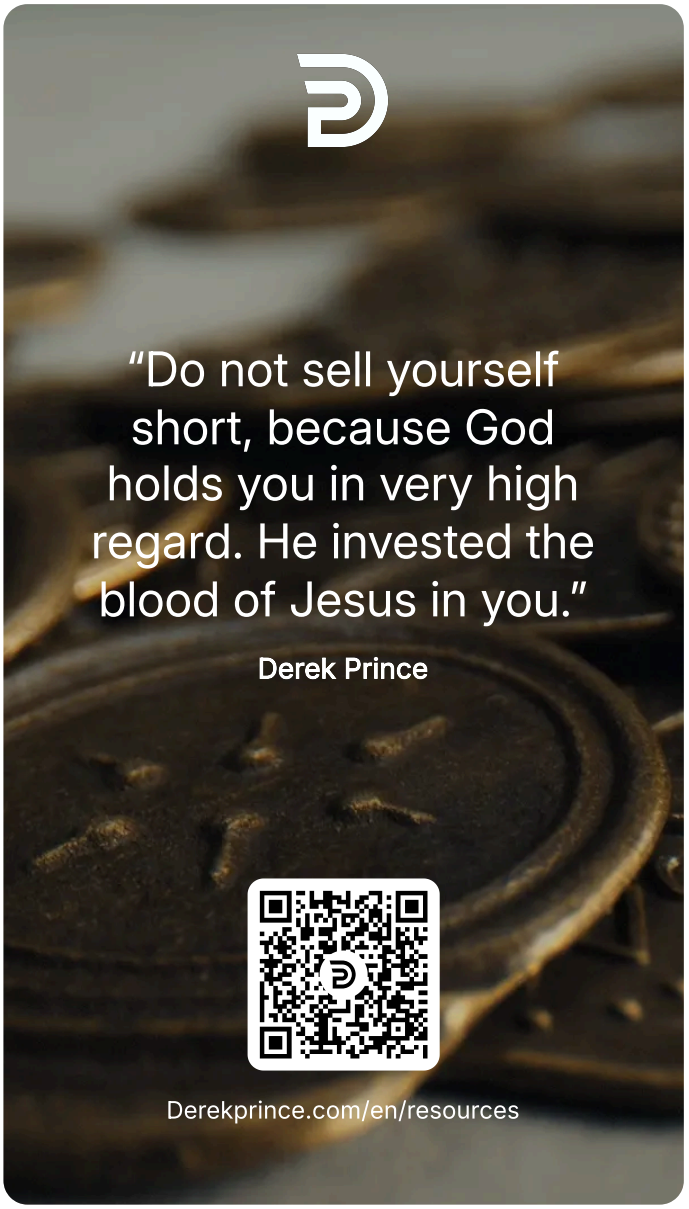
> Let me die the death of the righteous, And let my end be like his! (Numbers 23:10)

Yet Balaam's prayer was not granted. He was executed in God's judgment upon the Midianites, whose money had tempted him to align himself against God.

The fate of Balaam provides a graphic illustration of the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 7:21–23:

> Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness."

Simply stated, there is no substitute for obeying God. That alone assures us of a place in heaven.



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