

Four Blessings of the Lord Amidst Adversity

Numbers 22–24

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Archaeological Moment: Balaam at Deir 'Alla

Before we open the text this morning, I want to share something that I find genuinely remarkable — and that bears directly on the passage we are studying today.

In 1967, archaeologists excavating a large religious worship site at Deir 'Alla, Jordan, made an extraordinary discovery. The site dates to the Late Bronze Age — roughly 1500 to 1200 BC, which is precisely the period in which Balaam would have lived — and continued in operation until approximately 700 BC, when it was destroyed by an earthquake. Deir 'Alla sits about twenty miles north of where the Israelites were camped across the Jordan from Jericho.

In the rubble left by that earthquake, researchers found fragments of painted plaster that had once covered a wall. Written on that plaster was an inscription identifying itself as an oracle of Balaam son of Beor — the same Balaam we encounter in our scripture this morning. The opening lines, as translated, read: *“Inscription of Balaam son of Beor, the man who was a seer of the gods.”*

This archaeological find is significant for several reasons. It confirms that Balaam was a historical figure of considerable fame and influence — not a minor curiosity, but a well-known religious practitioner whose oracles were preserved, displayed, and studied for centuries. It also tells us something about the world into which this story speaks. Balaam was not some backwater fortune-teller. He was, by the standards of his day, immensely powerful and widely respected.

With that in mind, let us turn to Numbers 22–24.

Setting the Stage: Israel on the Plains of Moab

We are nearing the end of the book of Numbers. For the people of Israel, forty years in the wilderness are nearly over. They have arrived at the location from which they will stage their entry into the promised land, the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan at Jericho.

Over the preceding chapters, subtle but significant changes have been taking place. Miriam and Aaron have both died; Eleazar now serves as high priest. In chapter 21, for the first time in the book of Numbers, we read of the people repenting and asking for forgiveness — and the Lord responding with a way of life amid the plague of fiery serpents: simply look at the bronze serpent and live. In that same chapter, for the first time in Numbers, the people sing songs and give praise. These are small things, but they signal that something is shifting.

In our scripture today — chapters 22 through 24 — we see the most striking reversal of all. Back in chapter 14, it was the people of Israel who were paralyzed by fear of the inhabitants of the land. That fear cost them a generation; it is the reason they spent forty years in the wilderness. Now, in these three chapters, the situation is inverted. It is not Israel trembling before its enemies, but the enemies trembling before Israel.

And this, I think, is precisely why these three chapters are in the Bible. In them, we get to go behind enemy lines. We see what is happening among those who seek to attack or curse the people of God, and we discover that God is already at work there, long before Israel is even aware of it. That must have been an enormous source of encouragement — and I believe it is meant to be an encouragement to us as well.

Balak, Balaam, and the Logic of Divination

Chapter 22 opens with the people of Israel arriving in the plains of Moab, and we are immediately drawn into the perspective of Balak, king of Moab, and his people. The text tells us plainly: “*Moab was in great dread of the people, because they were many. Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel. And Moab said to the elders of Midian, ‘This horde will now lick up all that is around us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field’*” (22:3–4).

So what does Balak do? He sends for Balaam.

Now, given what we have just seen from Deir 'Alla, we understand the weight of that decision. Balaam was a *seer* — a practitioner who claimed the ability to read certain signs (the flight of birds, the entrails of a sacrificed animal, the patterns of nature) and thereby discern the will of the gods. More than that, Balaam claimed to know how to *please* the gods — how to perform the right rituals in the right way so as to move the gods to act according to his wishes. The technical term for this is divination, and it is how Balaam is remembered in the book of Joshua (13:22). In the ancient Near Eastern world, this was a serious and sophisticated enterprise. People paid enormously for access to someone who could reliably get the gods to act on their behalf. Balaam was the best in the business.

Balak’s commission to him is blunt: “*Behold, a people has come out of Egypt. They cover the face of the earth, and they are dwelling opposite me. Come now, curse this people for me, since*

they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed” (22:5–6).

Balaam consults the Lord, and the Lord says no. So Balaam declines. Balak sends a second, more impressive delegation with greater promises of wealth — and here we begin to see the real Balaam. Instead of simply repeating his refusal, Balaam essentially says, *perhaps God did not tell me everything the first time*. He asks again. This time, God permits him to go.

I want to be very clear about what is happening here, because it is theologically important. God did not change his mind. When he said *do not go*, he meant *do not go* — not *wait for a better offer*. But Balaam is intent on going, drawn by the promise of wealth, and so God allows it. This is a distinction worth pressing: God permitting something is not the same as God willing it. Balaam would have been far better off if he had stayed home. Instead, he goes — and on the way, God makes it unmistakably clear to him that he is only to say what God gives him to say.

A Donkey Wiser Than Its Master

The famous episode that follows is not simply comic relief, though it is certainly that. It is a pointed theological argument about who Balaam actually is.

On his way to meet Balak, the angel of the Lord appears in the road with a drawn sword. Balaam cannot see the angel, but his donkey can. Three times the donkey turns aside to avoid the angel — into a field, against a wall, finally lying down in the road — and three times Balaam beats her. Then the Lord opens the mouth of the donkey.

“What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?” she asks (22:28).

Balaam, remarkably unbothered by the fact that his donkey is speaking to him, answers with anger: *“Because you have made a fool of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you”* (22:29).

The donkey replies with perfect logic: *“Am I not your donkey, on which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat you this way?”* (22:30).

Balaam has to answer honestly: no, it is not.

Only then does the Lord open Balaam’s eyes to see the angel standing in the road. The angel’s words are sobering: *“Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse before me. The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live”* (22:32–33).

The point of this episode is not subtle. Balaam, the great seer who claimed to see what others could not, could not see what his donkey saw. The donkey — trying to obey, turning away from danger, using plain common sense — is more spiritually perceptive than the man who made his living claiming special insight into the divine. The famous seer is, in the end, no smarter than his donkey. He is, to use the word the angel uses, perverse. Be warned, going into the oracles that follow: Balaam is a fool.

The Four Blessings

Balaam arrives, and Balak takes him to a high place overlooking the Israelite camp — the better to curse them. But notice how Balaam goes about this. He instructs Balak to build seven altars and sacrifice seven bulls and seven rams. This is divination in its purest form: Balaam is attempting to construct the right ritual, to offer the right sacrifice, to please God and thereby compel God to act as he wishes.

Here is a theological distinction worth pausing on. In the Bible, the sacrificial system described in Leviticus — all of it — has to do with atonement, the forgiveness of sins, purification, and fellowship between God and his people. The sacrifices of scripture are not offerings made *to* God for God's benefit. They are provided *by* God, for the people, so that the people may approach him. Their purpose is reconciliation and presence — not leverage. What Balaam and Balak are doing is radically different: they are trying to bribe God into doing their bidding. The prophet Hosea captures the Lord's rejection of this logic with great clarity: *“For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings”* (Hosea 6:6).

God will not be bribed. And so, four times, when Balaam opens his mouth to curse Israel, blessing comes out instead.

The First Blessing: God's Faithfulness

The first oracle is found in Numbers 23:7–10.

“From Aram Balak has brought me, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains: ‘Come, curse Jacob for me, and come, denounce Israel!’ How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced? For from the top of the crags I see him, from the hills I behold him; behold, a people dwelling alone, and not counting itself among the nations! Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his!”

Listen to what Balaam sees when he looks down at the camp of Israel: a people so numerous they cannot be counted, a people set apart, a people whose end he envies. This is a direct echo of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 13: *"I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted"* (13:16). That promise was spoken some six hundred years before this moment. And here it stands, visibly, undeniably fulfilled — not because Israel was faithful, but because God was. The blessing of faithfulness is not contingent on Israel's worthiness. It rests entirely on the character of God.

The same is true for those who are in Christ. God's faithfulness blesses you. He is faithful to complete the work he has begun in you (Philippians 1:6). He is faithful to work all things together for good according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). He is faithful never to leave you (Matthew 28:20). He is faithful to hear your prayers (John 14:13–14), to fight for you (Exodus 14:14), to give you peace (John 14:27), and to forgive your sins and cleanse you of all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). To be blessed by God means, first and fundamentally, that we live under the canopy of his faithfulness.

The Second Blessing: God's Presence

The second oracle is found in Numbers 23:18–24.

"Rise, Balak, and hear; give ear to me, O son of Zippor: God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? Behold, I received a command to bless: he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it. He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob, nor has he seen trouble in Israel. The LORD their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them. God brings them out of Egypt and is for them like the horns of the wild ox. For there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel; now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, 'What has God wrought!' Behold, a people! As a lioness it rises up and as a lion it lifts itself; it does not lie down until it has devoured the prey and drunk the blood of the slain."

The heart of this oracle is verse 21: *"The LORD their God is with them."* That is it. That is the blessing. To know and enjoy the presence of God — this is what it means to be blessed.

I want to press on this, because I think it is the center of everything. This is the heart of what it means to be saved: not simply to have sins forgiven, not simply to avoid judgment, but to be brought into the presence of God and to live there. This is why Jesus says of himself, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6). Being with Jesus is the way. Being with Jesus is the truth. Being with Jesus is the life. And it is

why, when Jesus speaks to the thief dying on the cross beside him, his promise is not simply *you will survive* or *you will be forgiven* — his promise is “*today you will be with me in paradise*” (Luke 23:43). What makes paradise paradise is the presence of Jesus. For me, this is the greatest blessing in my life and the greatest source of joy and strength I know.

The Third Blessing: God’s Gracious Abundance

Balak is furious after the second oracle, but Balaam presses on. The third oracle is found in Numbers 24:3–9.

“The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is opened, the oracle of him who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down with his eyes uncovered: How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel! Like palm groves that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like aloes that the LORD has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters. Water shall flow from his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters; his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted. God brings him out of Egypt and is for him like the horns of the wild ox; he shall eat up the nations, his adversaries, and shall break their bones in pieces and pierce them through with his arrows. He crouched, he lay down like a lion and like a lioness; who will rouse him up? Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you.”

The imagery here is lush and overflowing — palm groves, gardens by a river, cedar trees beside the water, buckets running over. This is the language of provision and abundance, of a people who lack nothing because God supplies everything. It calls to mind what Jesus says in Matthew 6: if God knows and provides for the birds of the air, how much more does he know and provide for you? “*Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you*” (Matthew 6:32–33).

We are blessed — blessed through the Lord’s gracious abundance toward us. Not because we have earned it or performed the right rituals, but because that is who God is toward his people.

The Fourth Blessing: God’s Victory

The fourth oracle is found in Numbers 24:15–19.

“The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is opened, the oracle of him who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down with his eyes uncovered: 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; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth. Edom shall be dispossessed; Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed. Israel is doing valiantly. And one from Jacob shall exercise dominion and destroy the survivors of cities!”

Victory over enemies was the last thing Balak wanted to hear. But more than military conquest, Balaam — by the Spirit of God — sees something far beyond his own moment. He says, *“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near.”* He is looking at something on the horizon that he cannot fully make out. *A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.* A scepter is the symbol of royal authority and victorious power. In the midst of enemies seeking a curse, Balaam sees a person.

He sees Jesus.

In the century before the birth of Christ, this oracle — Numbers 24:17 — was one of the primary messianic prophecies to which the Jewish people looked in their waiting for the Messiah. So we should not be surprised when we arrive at Matthew 2 and find a group of wise men — magi, seers from the east — arriving in Jerusalem and asking, *“Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him”* (Matthew 2:2).

I have no proof of this, but I like to think that just as we know certain oracles of Balaam were written on the walls at Deir 'Alla, this prophecy of a star coming out of Jacob may have been among them — or at least among the traditions those magi inherited. For a thousand years, people had been reading this oracle and watching the night sky. And then one night it appeared: the star of Jacob, the sign of the one born King, the one who is victorious.

The victory of Israel over its enemies in the book of Joshua, and then under David, was real — but it was also conditional and temporary. When Israel sinned and turned away, their enemies overcame them. That is the story of the Old Testament. The blessing of victory ebbed and flowed with the people's faithfulness to the covenant. But the victory that comes in Jesus Christ is not conditional and it is not temporary. He has waged war against sin and death and won — once, finally, decisively. And if you are in Christ, his victory is your victory. *“But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (1 Corinthians 15:57).

Conclusion: The Blessings Are Yours in Christ

Today, perhaps you find yourself in a situation where you feel overwhelmed — where it seems the whole world is against you. Maybe it is a family situation. Maybe it is something from your past that continues to haunt you. Maybe it is a relationship at work or in your neighborhood, some person or circumstance that has been a persistent source of grief and turmoil. Something is seeking to rob you of your joy and your effectiveness as a child of God.

God's response to those who seek to curse his people is not, "*Oh well, sorry about that.*" His response is Jesus. Through Christ we discover all four of these blessings:

It is in Christ that we encounter God's faithfulness. It is through Christ that we enjoy his presence. It is through Christ that we receive an abundance of grace. And it is through Christ that we have victory over all that seeks to curse and do harm.

And how do we receive these blessings? Not by calculating how many animals must be sacrificed on how many altars — not by performing the right ritual to move God to act. We receive them by faith. By simply trusting him.

Numbers 22–24 is the story of a seer hired to curse the people of God, who instead blesses them — four times, by the compulsion of God's own Spirit. Those blessings belong to us in Christ amidst whatever adversity we face in the world today. Come to the table and receive them.