

June 2

Scriptures: Read Numbers 22 & 23

Key Verse: “And God said to Balaam, “You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.” (Numbers 22:12)

Overview

Balak, the pagan king of Moab, undoubtedly heard of Israel’s other victories and became terrified that they might attack him. He knew that in order to defeat Israel he needed supernatural help; therefore he called upon the well-known heathen soothsayer, Balaam, to pronounce a curse upon them, and in return Balaam would be well paid. The nomadic Midianites, who were allies of the Moabites, had probably heard of Balaam’s fame in their travels and reported it to Balak, who would have believed in magical divination. Some nobles of Moab and Midian were sent on a long journey to bring Balaam from northern Mesopotamia, about 450 kilometers away. Was he a true prophet of God? Some of his words might lead one to believe he was, but he probably considered himself the spokesman for nay god. The Hebrew text does not call him the title of “nabi”, meaning a prophet, but rather “kosem”, a soothsayer (Josh.13:22), and such people were not to be tolerated, for they were “an abomination to the Lord: (Deut.18:10-12)

No one can dispute that God actually spoke to Balaam; He clearly told him not to go for the purpose of cursing Israel (22:12). However, when a second delegation of a higher status came, promising even more wealth to Balaam, he asked them to wait until he heard from God, probably hoping that He would change His mind; however Balaam himself later uttered words in his first oracle expressing God’s immutability (23:19). There was no need to wait for God’s answer, since He had already said “no”. However, because God knows the heart and will of man, He allowed Balaam to go because of Balaam’s own will, but stipulated that he only speak the words He gave him. On Balaam’s journey, God clearly showed His displeasure with him, for it would seem Balaam inwardly desired to curse Israel, in disobedience to God.

With his hard heart, Balaam was blinded from seeing the angel of God armed with a sword; however his donkey was not, and its reactions on the three different occasions of the angel’s appearance made Balaam furious and he struck it. The well-known miracle of Balaam’s donkey speaking then took place, but even its rebuke of Balaam did not deter him from his desire to proceed. Finally, God opened his eyes to see the angel, and Balaam acted like a penitent, but it seems it wasn’t true repentance from the heart. The angel allowed him to pass, but strongly warned him again to speak only the words God gave him (22:35), thus making him more aware of the seriousness of what he was to do, for he was not to change the word of God.

Even though he spoke the true words of God, they are not referred to as a prophecy, but rather they are called by the more appropriate term, “oracle” (23:7). Balaam was but a vehicle through whom God spoke, just as the donkey was a vehicle through which God rebuked Balaam. Balaam, who had wanted to curse Israel, was made to bless them because of God’s love for them (Deut.23:5). Although Balaam expressed the desire to be like the Israelites (23:10b), his heart was not right, for he certainly did not die in peaceful righteousness (Josh.13:22).

God gave Balaam two oracles of blessing that were truth from God: the first was about Israel's being separate from the other nations and that they would be as numerous as the dust (23:9-10); the second was about the faithfulness and unchanging character of God, Israel's purity, and His promise that no divination could harm God's defense over His people, and that they would be victorious (23:19-24).

Balaam, himself a sorcerer and brought by Balak for the express purpose of magically cursing the Israelites, had to admit in his oracle that "there is no sorcery against Jacob, not is there any divination against Israel" (23:23). He was rendered powerless by God to do or say anything evil against Israel, as Balak had desired. Likewise, we as believers covered by the blood of Jesus are protected from any harmful, direct attacks against us by the enemy, as is the Church as a whole, and "the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it?" (Matt.16:18b).

Prayer

Lord God of Israel, thank You that You deliver from all power of sorcery. Thank You that you turn curses into blessings for Your children.