

1. This chapter brings a three chapter section about a non-Jewish prophet who has legitimate power to talk to God and blesses the Israelites despite the fact he was hired to curse them. My job here is to explain why these chapters are here and why we should care about them. If I can get that mission accomplished, actually discussing the verses themselves is easy in comparison.
 - a) I have to admit, this chapter has more questions than answers. How does one explain a non-Israelite at this point in the story who literally has the power to understand what God is saying to him? He wants to use that power for his own greed, and not for the good of God's people? That in effect, is the main issue of the next several chapters in this book.
 - b) Let me at this point give me title, "Understanding the story of Balak and Balaam".
 - i) There are two main characters in this story, neither one of which is Jewish.
 - ii) One is the king of a group called the Moabites. At this point in Numbers, the Israelites are just east of the land of Israel in the land of the Moabites.
 - iii) These two names do sound familiar. Let me teach you how to keep them straight.
 - a) In English, Balak ends with a "k". He is the king of the Moabites.
 - b) In English, Balaam ends with an "m". He is mainly interested in money.
 - c) Therefore, if you pay attention to the last letter in their names as you read through this lesson, it will help us to remember who is who.
 - c) Let me also give some thoughts to ponder as one reads this story:
 - i) Ponder why this story is even here in the bible. The Israelites are not part of it.
 - ii) Next, wonder how Moses, the author of Numbers found out about this story as there is no contact with the Israelites during this whole section.
 - iii) Let me tell you about the main characters of this chapter: The first one is a foreign king who is worried about the Israelites attacking his nation. As a matter of fact, the Israelites never do conquer them. Then we have Balaam from a different place, who has the power to talk to God, and is hired by this king to curse the Israelites.
 - a) Imagine this religious man thinking, "I'm being paid all of this money in order to do say something negative about the Israelites, but my power source, God, tells me to say something positive." How do I resolve this?
 - d) With that said, let me discuss the more important question: Why we should care?
 - i) Even if we accept the idea that this foreign prophet could tap into the power of the true and living God, and accept the fact that he does bless the Israelites without them even being aware of, why I should care about any of this ancient history?
 - a) For starters, the implication is that God can bless us even if we are not aware we are being blessed. Let's assume for the moment that all of this we read is true. In that case, this foreign prophet will reciting the words that God told him to speak. Those words are in effect that God is blessing these Israelites, as they were (and still are) His chosen people.
 - b) OK, even if I accept the idea that they are blessed, how am I blessed? It is to accept the idea that eternity is a whole lot longer than this lifetime. It is to accept the idea that Jesus is both God and the one who completely paid the price for our sins, past, present and future. Our simple trust in that fact makes us eternally blessed whether we completely understand it or not.
 - ii) Even if we do accept that, tell me now why should I study this story? Part of it, is to accept the idea that God can give people specific gifts and power. If those same people refuse to do His will, they (and us) can suffer for making that decision.
 - a) We can have a special gift from God, but that is no guarantee that we are always doing His will or always being blessed by Him at that moment.

2. Let me explain these chapters another way that can help us relate to them:
 - a) We may see a person with a specific talent to say, be very powerful, influential or have the ability to make lots of money. Good for them. However, that still may not be saved. This chapter and this lesson reminds us that God gives gifts to whom He gives, and we have to accept that fact. At the same time, being blessed by Him is based on our trust in Him and not any specific gift or power than He chooses to give certain people.
 - b) As I like to say, I have enough problems worrying about my own relationship with God, then to worry about whether someone I don't know is doing His will with their own lives. That doesn't mean I don't care about other people. It just means I learn to control what I can control and let go of what I can't fix and I pray for God to give the wisdom to know the difference.
 - c) This leads me back to the prophet Balaam:
 - i) Do I believe he really existed at one time? Yes.
 - ii) Do I believe he had the power to be a legitimate prophet? Yes.
 - iii) Do I believe he really blessed the Israelites? Yes, of course.
 - iv) Do I believe he was doing God's will? Yes, through these blessings, but not after these blessings. The New Testament speak negatively of how he made the effort to harm God's chosen people despite the fact Balaam was called to bless them.
3. With that speech out of my system, let me quickly summarize the chapter, and we'll get started.
 - a) There was a group of people called the Moabites. They lived just east of Israel.
 - b) The Israelites were now camped in their territory. The last we read of the Israelites is that they won a battle over the Amorites who have defeated the Moabites prior to this time.
 - i) The Moabites were scared to death of the Israelites because they defeated a nation more powerful than them and now those Israelites are in their "backyard".
 - c) Therefore, the king of the Moabites says, "Wait a minute, I know about this powerful man who lives far away. Maybe if we pay this man enough money, he will curse the Israelites for us. Ok, everyone empty your pockets, as we need to raise lots of money for him."
 - i) I admit, I made up that last line and it is not in the text.
 - d) Anyway, much of this chapter is about how the king of the Moabites named Balak works to hire the prophet Balaam to come curse God's people. In fact, we will read about this prophet actually talking to God about what to do. While Balaam does say what God tells him to say, he still wonders in effect, "How do I still collect my cursing fee?"
 - e) The actual blessings will be the topic of my next lesson. My focus for this lesson is about understanding why the story of King Balak and the prophet Balaam is even in the bible.
 - i) With that question in place, I would like to start the verse-by-verse text here.
4. Chapter 22, Verse 1: Then the Israelites traveled to the plains of Moab and camped along the Jordan across from Jericho.
 - a) I have to admit, that of the three types of bible text, "story" is the easiest to teach. What I mean by that is the bible is generally divided into three types of text: The first is when it is telling a story like this chapter. The second is prophecy. That is when the bible is giving predictions about the future. The third is poetry, when verses are in poetic forms.
 - i) With that said, know that this chapter is a straightforward story that tells us the story of these two non-Jewish characters named Balak and Balaam.
 - ii) The next two chapters (next lesson) are mostly "poetry" as they describe the four separate predictions given by the prophet Balaam for the nation of Israel. To state the obvious, I'm going to wait until the next lesson before I actually talk about the specific predictions made by this prophet and what we can learn from them.
 - b) Meanwhile, my job for this lesson is to explain why this story is here, and explain what it is God wants us to learn from this lesson. I figure that job is hard enough as it is.
 - c) Know that the Israelites here are now across the Jordan River just outside of the border of Israel. In modern terms, this is the land of Jordan. The Moabite nation no longer exists.

5. Verse 2: Now Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites,³ and Moab was terrified because there were so many people. Indeed, Moab was filled with dread because of the Israelites.⁴ The Moabites said to the elders of Midian, "This horde is going to lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field."
 - a) At this point, we get introduced to one of the two main characters in this story, the king of the Moabites named Balak.
 - b) It may help at this point to remember and learn a few facts here:
 - i) At this point, the number of Israelites was around two million people.
 - ii) It is estimated the number of Moabites was a lot less than this figure.
 - iii) The Moabites recently (prior to the time of this section of Numbers) lost a war to the Amorites. The Israelites just defeated the Amorites in the previous chapter. Therefore, the king of the Moabites had a real reason to be scared. That reason was in effect, "Here are these guys that just defeated the people who defeated us and now they are in our territory."
 - iv) In Verse 4 the king spoke to the leaders of the Midianites. This second group was not part of the Moabites, but was a neighboring tribe. In effect, the king shared his fears with the Midianites and again said in effect, "we are in big trouble".
 - v) Another interesting thing to note here is that the Israelites had no intention to ever even attack the Moabites. They just wanted to pass through their territory. God never called the Israelites to destroy this nation. Know that the Moabites were another distant cousin of the Israelites. If you recall from Genesis, Abraham, the father of the Israelites had a nephew was named Lot. Moab was a son of Lot. My point is the Moabites had no reason to fear the Israelites but didn't know that.
 - vi) Notice in Verse 2 that Balak is the "Son of Zippor". Moses first wife was from this area, was named Zipporah. That is the feminine form of the same name. Scholars wonder if there is any relationship between the two. It also makes me wonder if that is somehow how Moses became aware of this story of Balak and Balaam.
 - c) All of this is in effect, background information to help us understand the story coming up. The main thing to remember is the king of the Moabites and therefore, probably the entire nation of Moabites were scared of the Israelites. Thus the story can continue.
6. Verse 4 (cont.): So Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time,⁵ sent messengers to summon Balaam son of Beor, who was at Pethor, near the River, in his native land. Balak said: "A people has come out of Egypt; they cover the face of the land and have settled next to me.⁶ Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the country. For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed."
 - a) The short version is King Balak sent a message to the prophet Balaam to come curse the Israelites, as he knows who ever Balaam blesses is blessed and the cursed is cursed.
 - b) There are some interesting things to consider here:
 - i) Why didn't Balak trust in his own gods for protection? Balaam was not part of the tribe of the Moabites and didn't believe in their religion.
 - ii) Notice King Balak knew this group came out of Egypt and knew their size.
 - iii) How did Balak hear of Balaam anyway? Without going into a lot of geographical details, Balaam lived far away. The text says Balaam lived near the river. Reading this in context, it refers to the Euphrates River.
 - a) There is archeological evidence that Balaam really existed. That evidence was found about 400 miles away from where King Balaam was, near the area mentioned in these verses. The point is Balaam traveled a long ways just to see King Balak given his present location.
 - iv) How did Balak know that this man could be purchased for service? I would argue that God already did some miracles through Balaam to give him that reputation.

- c) I admit, I am still wondering how Moses discovered all of this information.
 - i) I wonder if somehow Moses got a hold of a written copy of the speech that Balaam gave and heard the story details. That is on my list of questions for God of "how did that happen"? Yes there is lots of speculation by Jewish scholars as how this was relayed to Moses, but we don't know for sure.
- d) OK John, you are way overdue for one of your "why should I care speeches" here:
 - i) The answer comes back to "those whom God blesses, He blesses." It may help to remember that there are demonic forces out there that don't want us to be a good witness for Jesus. Satan can't take away our salvation, but his forces do want us to not make a difference for Jesus and lead others to Him. That is why Christians get spiritual resistance when we make such an effort. As I like to say every so often, if you don't believe Satan is real, try opposing him and see what happens.
 - ii) The point for us is that just as the Israelites were unaware all of this is going on in the background of their lives, know that there are spiritual forces that are trying to help us make a difference for God and other spiritual forces resisting that effort.
 - iii) Even if all of that is true, why should I care? Remember that the secret to making a difference for God is not about trying hard. It is about drawing upon His power in order to make a difference in the world. It is the idea that He who guides us, is greater in power than he (Satan) who is in the world.
 - a) That does not mean that every bad thing that happens to us is demonic. It just means that when we do make the effort to make a difference for God, it is by His power we make that difference. Just as Balaam will not be able to curse what King Balaam told him to curse, so the powers that try to stop us from making a difference for God are no match against His power.
- e) Meanwhile, it is time to get back to the story of King Balak and the prophet Balaam.

7. Verse 7: The elders of Moab and Midian left, taking with them the fee for divination. When they came to Balaam, they told him what Balak had said. ⁸ "Spend the night here," Balaam said to them, "and I will bring you back the answer the LORD gives me." So the Moabite princes stayed with him.

- a) The short version here is a collection was taken up by the Moabites and the Midianites to pay Balaam for his services. When those elders showed up, Balaam's response was for them to spend the night, while Balaam talks to God about what to say.
- b) Something interesting to consider is that Balaam calls God "The LORD". When that word is in all capitals, it refers to the most holy name of God. In English we might translated that name "Jehovah" or "I am that I am". Somehow, Balaam is aware of that title.
 - i) So how did Balaam know that name? Don't know. Some speculate that he came from the same area as Abraham and knew it that way. Another possibility is that Balaam, being a professional prophet, knew as part of his job, the names of the gods of other nations, including the Israelites. Therefore, somehow he knew that when the Israelites spoke to their god, they called Him "LORD" and used that same title when he spoke to God.
 - ii) What is interesting to notice is that while Balaam refers to God as "LORD", God Himself never responds with the same level of respect. It is as if God is saying to Him in this chapter, "Yes Balaam have the ability to know who I am, but you are not willing in doing My will and I'll treat you accordingly."
 - a) Now stop and think of all the people that you know who acknowledge that God exists, but never trust in His power to guide their lives. It is like the type of people who just want God to be "genie in a bottle", but don't want Him to actually rule over their lives.
- c) Meanwhile back to the text. I don't know if Balaam heard from God in his sleep or just wanted to spend the night in prayer waiting for God an answer to this request.

8. Verse 9: God came to Balaam and asked, "Who are these men with you?" ¹⁰ Balaam said to God, "Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent me this message: ¹¹ 'A people that has come out of Egypt covers the face of the land. Now come and put a curse on them for me. Perhaps then I will be able to fight them and drive them away.' "
- a) One thing that is interesting to see here is what Balaam did know and did not know about the Israelites and their relationship with God.
 - i) Balaam did know about the term "LORD".
 - ii) Balaam did not know the Israelites were "God's people".
 - iii) Balaam did know that this foreign group of people, the Moabites (foreign to him) came a long distance with the request to curse the Israelites.
 - iv) Balaam did know that if he was to curse the Israelites, he had to call upon God in order to have that done in the first place. It makes you wonder what did Balaam actually believe about God and His power.
 - b) Another thing that is interesting to consider is why did God ask Balaam these questions in the first place. Was God not aware of this situation? Of course He was. The point here is that God wanted Balaam to understand the situation and think about what he is asking God to do by cursing the Israelites.
 - c) Again, one of the fascinating things to me about this whole section is that not only Balaam knew who God was, Balaam can speak to Him and God responds. So why did God speak to this man? In effect, for His purposes to get done for His people. The point is God will use who God will use and we have to accept that fact about life.
 - i) That is a reminder in life that nonbelievers are more than welcome to talk to God and He may even respond if He chooses to. The issue for everyone's life is about whether or not we actually use our lives to serve our God.
 - d) OK, enough of my "interesting and fascinating things". Time to get back to the story.
9. Verse 12: But God said to Balaam, "Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed." ¹³ The next morning Balaam got up and said to Balak's princes, "Go back to your own country, for the LORD has refused to let me go with you." ¹⁴ So the Moabite princes returned to Balak and said, "Balaam refused to come with us."
- a) John's very loose translation, "Balaam was hoping to collect a big check, but Balaam also knew he couldn't violate his "power source" in order to collect that fee, so God's answer to Balaam's request was no. Therefore Balaam told the kings' representatives to just go back home and the request for a curse was denied."
 - i) Short version: Payment refused. Thanks for asking though. ☺
 - b) When God speaks, it is the Hebrew word "Elohim" which roughly means "Creator of the world". When Balaam speaks to God, he calls Him "LORD", because Balaam understood that God does rule over the world. Just because someone does understand God rules over the world is not enough to do His will. One must trust in His complete payment for our sins and then out of gratitude for that salvation, live to make a difference for Him.
 - c) Meanwhile, King Balak was not willing to give up so easily. The king understood Balaam was motivated by money. The king figured, "I know what I did wrong, I didn't write this guy a big enough check, and it is time for me to try again."
10. Verse 15: Then Balak sent other princes, more numerous and more distinguished than the first. ¹⁶ They came to Balaam and said: "This is what Balak son of Zippor says: Do not let anything keep you from coming to me, ¹⁷ because I will reward you handsomely and do whatever you say. Come and put a curse on these people for me."
- a) John's Translation: Here is a much bigger pile of money than what I brought you last time. Now, come on, Balaam, this is a really big fee. Do what you do best, as I, (King Balak) am aware that who you curse, is cursed. Besides, I'm all out of options. The Israelites are too large of a nation for me to conquer. I admit this makes me wonder how many prayers to false gods have been prayed over the millenniums against the Israelites and God's people.

11. Verse 18: But Balaam answered them, "Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the LORD my God.
¹⁹Now stay here tonight as the others did, and I will find out what else the LORD will tell me."
 - a) Time for more of my loose translation: "I (Balaam) truly appreciate the really big check. However, I can't violate my power source in order to curse them. Still, that really is a big sum of money and I could buy some really nice things with it. Stay with me for the night while I talk to God and see if there is any loophole I can find that would allow me to curse these people anyway and take your money."
 - b) In the introduction to this lesson, I stated that the way to not mix up the similar sounding names of Balak and Balaam is to remember that in English, Balak ends with a "k" as in a king and Balaam ends with a "m" as in money. My point here is that one can sense the greed of Balaam. He knows that he can't violate God's will, but he wants the money.
 - c) In Verse 20, God responds to Balaam's request to compromise. That fact alone reminds us that God never violates our free will. If we don't want to obey Him, He lets us turn from Him and suffer the consequences. Speaking of which, let us read on.
12. Verse 20: That night God came to Balaam and said, "Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you."
 - a) God is saying in effect, "Look, this King Balak is stubborn and won't give up easily. If you don't go with these men, he will come back again and keep asking. Therefore, I (God) will not compromise in terms of blessing My people, but I will allow you (Balaam) to go with them in order for you to give My message to the king yourself. That way, you can collect your fee but still do what I say."
 - b) It's time for me to sneak ahead and realize some things about Balaam. While he never actually curses the Israelites, he is guilty of making the Israelites sin by allowing some of them to worship Moabite gods. This is discussed in Deuteronomy 23:4-5. In the New Testament, Balaam is given as an example of someone who helped the Israelites to sin by encouraging them to turn away from God. (2nd Peter 2:15, Jude 1:11 and Revelation 2:14.)
 - i) My point is despite the fact that this man does speak to God and does obey Him to speak what God told him to say, he is guilty of violating God's will for his life.
 - ii) The point for you and me is that "Partial obedience does not count with God". He desires that every aspect of our lives be submissive to His will.
 - iii) Does that mean we will never sin? Of course not. It is just a reminder that when it comes to obedience, God demands full obedience and not partial obedience.
 - iv) Meanwhile, God is encouraging Balaam to do the right thing, and in this particular case, that meant to only speak exactly what God tells him to speak.
13. Verse 21: Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab.
²²But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose him. Balaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. ²³ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, she turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat her to get her back on the road.
 - a) To explain these verses, first let us start with "God was very angry" in Verse 22. I believe the point here is that God understood that Balaam was looking for a loophole to be able to curse the Israelites and collect his fee. I believe a perfect God does not have any emotions. The idea of "very angry" is our perception of His response to our decisions.
 - i) With that said, note that this next set of verses is designed to for us to understand that when God wants us to understand His point, He will make it clear to us.
 - b) Here we have Balaam riding on a donkey to go visit king Balak. Traveling on a road from wherever Balaam lived to Balak, all of a sudden "the angel of the LORD" was in the middle of this road and had a drawn sword. Apparently, Balaam was unaware that this angel was standing there. However the donkey that Balaam was riding on, saw him.
 - c) All of this is going to lead to one of the strangest miracles in the entire bible.

- d) Before I can even get to the miracle of the "speaking donkey", I need to share a few facts about this last set of verses.
 - i) The first is that when the donkey saw this angel, the donkey turned off the road and turned into a field to get out of the angel's way. At that point, the prophet Balaam beat the donkey in order for the animal to get back on the road.
 - ii) The text also mentions two servants were with Balaam. I believe it just means he had two witnesses to the event that is about to be described who could collaborate this story.
 - e) Finally, let me talk a little about "The Angel of the Lord". There is a theory, (not a known fact, but a theory) that when the term "the" Angel is used as opposed "a" angel, it refers to an Old Testament appearance of Jesus. In the book of Joshua, "the" angel shows up again also with a sword like this story and Joshua worships that angel. (See Joshua 5:13-14.)
 - i) Again, one cannot even be positive that the story here has the same entity that is in the story of Joshua, Chapter 5. I'm just saying that in both cases, an "entity" just happens to show up and in both cases, a sword is in this entity's hands.
 - ii) So why would I think this is an Old Testament appearance of Jesus? For starters, I do believe that Jesus always existed. He wasn't just "born" in the New Testament.
 - iii) Next, this role of "the" angel is to guide and protect those who trust in God. That is a model of how God lives inside of us to guide us. At the same time God never forces His will upon us, but somehow if we seek Him, we do get ideas of what is the right or wrong thing to do in situations.
 - a) Here this angel has a sword in his hand. Did he need it to kill Balaam? Doubt it. I think the sword was there to make a point about stubbornness.
 - b) In both this section and in Joshua, this angel is recognized as something sent by God to influence the person this angel (entity) is speaking to.
 - iv) While Balaam at this moment is thinking of ways to curse the Israelites, this angel steps in to make an effort to stop Him. If nothing else, it supports the concept that God cares about His people. Whether or not it is Jesus Himself is a debated issue.
 - v) What does matter is that God cares about His people and He does work in the background to guide and help those who trust in Him. That is what we see here.
 - f) Meanwhile, we left Balaam hitting his donkey, while the donkey spots this angel.
14. Verse 24: Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between two vineyards, with walls on both sides.²⁵ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. So he beat her again.
- a) One has to admit, this story is strange. Here is a Balaam riding a donkey to go meet King Balak. The road he is traveling along narrows here as there are walls on both sides. The donkey, but not Balaam sees this angel and this causes the donkey to stop. Balaam who doesn't see the angel here, beats the donkey for going off the main road.
 - i) If there is one thing I have learned a long time ago about studying my bible, it is to focus on the "why" question and not the "how" question. I figure if God can create the heavens and the earth, then He could make this or any situation possible.
 - a) Could God create an angel that only the donkey sees and not Balaam? Of course He can. Can I explain how this is possible? Not at all.
 - ii) What we as Christians call miracles are in effect things that defy explanation. Most people who live long enough get to see such miracles if we know how to look for them. Many people write off such miracles as coincidences or just think that they are things that they can't explain.
 - a) The reality of miracles is that God works in ways that we can't explain. Therefore, let us focus on the "why" and not the "how".
 - b) In the meantime, I have the more difficult job of trying to explain why God choose to speak through this donkey and not to Balaam directly at this point in the story.

- c) As I said in the beginning, this story is both deadly serious and humorous at the same time. Let's face it, God working through a donkey is silly. However, we are more likely to remember this story, given what we have read so far and what is coming up.
 - i) Think of the story this way. Donkeys are associated with being stubborn. Here is this prophet Balaam being stubborn in that despite the fact that God told him not to listen to King Balak, Balaam still goes after a "bigger check". In other words, his desire for money is making him compromise on what God called him to do.
 - ii) With God working through a "stubborn mule", it shows us how God can work through our own stubbornness in order to accomplish His will for our lives.
 - iii) Meanwhile, this story is about to get even stranger. Let's read onward.
- 15. Verse 26: Then the angel of the LORD moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. ²⁷ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam, and he was angry and beat her with his staff. ²⁸ Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"
 - a) OK, first we had this donkey recognize that he was seeing an angel. Now we actually have the donkey speaking at this point in the story. Some commentators try to argue that Balaam imagined this whole story and this is how he related it as it is told in Numbers.
 - i) My personal view is that I take the bible at face value. Is it possible for a donkey to speak? Not that I know of. However, if "God is God", He can make anything happen. That is why I rarely ask the "how" question and primarily focus on the "why" question here in these studies. Is it possible this story was all a figment of the imagination of Balaam? Of course. However, other places in the bible describe this story as literal, and I'd rather trust the bible than other's views.
 - b) Meanwhile, onto the story itself. The short version here is the road was narrow here. At this point the donkey saw the angel again and stopped. Balaam beat the donkey. Then the donkey spoke and said in effect, "What have I done to cause you to beat me here?"
 - i) What is fascinating is that Balaam never questions how the donkey could speak. Balaam just answers the donkey's question in the next verse. That is why some people speculate that this was just a "figment of Balaam's imagination." Either that, or Balaam was so mad about the donkey stopping, it didn't even matter to him that the donkey actually spoke to him.
 - c) Think of it this way, all Balaam cared about at this point was getting to his destination, which was the headquarters of King Balak. The fact that the donkey was being stubborn was preventing him from accomplishing his goal. Consider the donkey's stubbornness in comparison to Balaam's stubbornness to do God's will.
 - d) Way back in Verse 18, Balaam referred to God as "my God". Does that mean that Balaam put his trust in God? Probably. Isn't that being saved by the Old Testament standards? Well, yes and no. Yes in the sense that we have to put our trust in God in order to guide our lives. It is also "no" in that if we don't do what He desires, He is not our God.
 - i) This requires an example. If we claim that Jesus died for our sins and we say that we trust in that fact, that is good unless we don't follow through. Let's say we go about stealing assuming we are saved. Let's say we don't think twice about lying because we assume we are saved. In such cases, saying God is "our God" may be fine and well, but we are not "putting our money where our mouth is".
 - ii) Does that mean we can sin enough to lose our salvation? Of course not. That idea misses the point. The point is if we believe God is "God", well, we should be doing something about it. We should live our lives based on that belief.
 - e) This leads me back to Balaam. For all I know, he may have been serious about referring to the Lord as his God. However, God knew his heart. Balaam was thinking, "How do I get paid, and still be obedient to God". Thus, we see his stubbornness in these verses.

16. Verse 29: Balaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now." ³⁰ The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" "No," he said. ³¹ Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown.
- a) Again one has to see the humor in these verses. Balaam said to his donkey (as if this was an every day occurrence), I would kill you if I could right now. The donkey spoke back to Balaam (again, as if this was an every day occurrence) in effect, "Have I ever had the habit before of disobeying you?" Balaam answered "No".
 - b) It was at that exact moment that God allowed Balaam to see the angel. Why now? The answer is to show Balaam his own stubbornness. When Balaam said "NO", he realized that this was unusual behavior for the donkey, so there must be more to the story.
 - c) Let's face it, in God's own strange way, this was a lesson for Balaam about his own act of stubbornness to do God's will. Remember that the next two chapters (next lesson) will be Balaam reciting four separate speeches about the future of the Jewish people.
 - d) This is God getting His message to Balaam in effect, "Stop being so stubborn. If it is your desire to have me be your God, then get ready to listen really well."
 - e) OK John, if God is working with this man and working on him in order to be obedient to Him, why do you associate him with money? Good question.
 - i) Again the New Testament has three references to Balaam. (2nd Peter 2:15, Jude 1:11 and Revelation 2:14.) All three refer to the "apostasy" of Balaam. That simply means that this guy worked against God's plans for those Israelites.
 - ii) Let me at this point jump ahead a little in the history of Israel. After Balaam does deliver the four positive speeches that are the next two chapters of this book, this man encourages the Moabites to send their best looking women to encourage the Israelites to join them to seek their Moabite gods. (See Numbers 25:1 and 31:16.)
 - a) The point is while Balaam did do what God desired of him here, he still in effect went after the money and worked against the good of God's people.
 - iii) But shouldn't the Israelites be blamed for turning against God? Yes they should and they suffer the loss of life for that event. (See Numbers 25:4-5). At the same time, God was working on the heart of Balaam because he went against God's will.
 - iv) My final question is in effect, "Is Balaam saved?" Don't know. If it is true that he did trust in the God of the bible for his salvation, one could argue yes. However, if he was more interested in earning the money than being obedient to God, one can argue no. The bible teaches only God is to judge who is saved. (See Isaiah 51:5.) We are called to judge behavior in this lifetime. The three references to Balaam in the New Testament negatively judge his behavior.
 - f) This is all interesting ancient history. What does it have to do with my life? First of all, it is a reminder that our lives are far more than what we know or see. While the Israelites are camping out in the wilderness. This whole "back story" is taking place here. It is an example of how God is working in the background of our own lives for our good in ways we probably may never be aware of in this lifetime.
 - g) Meanwhile, back to Balaam and the donkey, when Balaam saw the angel here, he realized he saw a messenger from God and fell facedown. By the way, that "fell face down" is why some argue that this angel is an appearance of Jesus. The idea is Balaam was worshipping God and he bows down at this point in the story to worship this "entity".
 - h) Doesn't this argue that Balaam is saved as he worshipped God (through the angel)? The only way you or I know if somebody has faith in God is based on their behavior and not what they say. Is it possible that Balaam was forgiven of this sin? Don't know. In fact, that is God's business and not ours. Our job is again, to judge behavior as it affects our own lives. Who gets to spend eternity with God is "His Business" and not ours.

17. Verse 32: The angel of the LORD asked him, "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me.³³ The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If she had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared her."
- a) At this point it is the angel's turn to speak. The angel addressed Balaam and said in effect, "Why did you beat your donkey? After all, he was obedient to me, but you weren't." The angel then said "I would have killed you by now, but spared the donkey."
 - b) Remember that Balaam couldn't see the angel until Verse 27. That verse mentioned that God opened the eyes of Balaam so he could see. Yet, God, speaking through this angel, states very clearly that he would have killed Balaam by now.
 - c) I don't believe the punishment against Balaam is about a failure to see the angel, as the text clearly states that Balaam's eyes had to be opened.
 - d) The issue from the angel's standpoint was Balaam's heart. Balaam may have stated he had a heart for God, but God knew his actions didn't follow his words, and the latter history of Balaam as I explained on the previous page, bares that out. My point is the angel was not mad that that Balaam didn't see him. The angel was mad that Balaam was in effect looking for an excuse to collect his check and still try to be obedient to God.
 - e) At this point I want to pause to give a famous quote that I believe fits Balaam well here:
 - i) I notice that a lot of the commentaries I read about Balaam quotes part of a famous line by Winston Churchill. This line was given on a speech about Russia. He said, "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest."
 - ii) My point is that when it comes to understanding Balaam, a lot of people use the line, "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma".
 - a) That is because this man Balaam literally has the power to speak to God as we have seen and will see in the next chapter.
 - b) At the same time we don't know how he has a relationship with God.
 - c) At the same time, he refers to God as "My God".
 - d) Later in the bible, Balaam will teach the Moabites how to turn the Israelites from God by encouraging the Moabite women to seduce Israelite men.
 - e) Therefore, he truly is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.
 - f) Meanwhile, back to the story. The angel states clearly that he or "He" has come to oppose Balaam because the angel or the God who sent this angel understood Balaam's heart. He desired to get the money and not do God's will for the Israelites.
 - g) This also reminds me of something I heard Chuck Missler say on this topic. He asked a question to a group of Christian businessmen one time, "What is your most important stewardship?" To say it another way for us, what is the most important ministry that each of us have as Christians? The answer of course, is our relationship with Him, or to use a common term in "Christian speech": our heart.
 - i) My point here is that Balaam's heart was not right with God at this moment, and that is why the angel stepped in here and we have this humorous and at the same time deadly serious story about having our heart's right with God.
18. Verse 34: Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned. I did not realize you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now if you are displeased, I will go back."
- a) If one needs any more proof that Balaam is truly a "riddle, wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma", I present Verse 34 as one's next proof verse.
 - b) Let's be honest, Balaam did repent here. He realized he displeased God here. He even offered to God at this point to go back to his home if God was displeased with him.
 - c) So is Balaam saved or not? Don't know. I just know the New Testament focuses on his sins and not what he did right here. I guess that is another reminder for us to make every effort to "finish well" what God has called us to do in life, which is trust Him always.

19. Verse 35: The angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you." So Balaam went with the princes of Balak.
 - a) I have to admit I wonder what the other men saw here. The text clearly says that Balaam was not the only man riding a donkey here. Balak's representatives rode along with him. Did these other men know that Balaam spoke to an angel here? Did the other men know that Balaam was told to only speak what God told him to speak? Don't know. I just know that Balaam now has other witnesses to collaborate this story.
 - b) Again, I also wonder how Moses found out about all of these details. After all, none of the Israelites knew about this story here. Later in the book, we will read about how the Israelites did kill Balaam (see Numbers 31:8). Maybe he revealed his story shortly before he was killed. Don't know.
 - c) Meanwhile, instead of speculating about what we don't know, let us focus for the moment on what we do know, Balaam agreed to cooperate with God's plan. So what was God's plan? That in effect is the next two chapters, which I'll cover in the next lesson.
 - d) Meanwhile again, I still have six more verses to cover here.
20. Verse 36: When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at the Moabite town on the Arnon border, at the edge of his territory.³⁷ Balak said to Balaam, "Did I not send you an urgent summons? Why didn't you come to me? Am I really not able to reward you?"
 - a) One has to remember that God knew Balaam was weak to the temptation of money. That is why this whole "donkey story" took place some time shortly before this encounter with King Balak. If you don't believe the king was anxious for this encounter, notice how the king traveled down the road a bit to go meet Balaam.
 - b) Remember that King Balak is still in fear of all the Israelites. He was in a hurry to have Balaam curse these people. Notice the king knew how to motivate Balaam. There is no mention about the size of the Israelites nor about how Balaam is to curse them. He just focuses on the fact "I could give you a house full of gold (in effect) for doing your thing."
21. Verse 38: "Well, I have come to you now," Balaam replied. "But can I say just anything? I must speak only what God puts in my mouth."
 - a) At this point Balaam not only tells the king, but I believe is also reminding himself for the sake of his own weakness that he can only speak what God tells him to say.
 - b) Remember that King Balak most likely believes in Moabite deities. I doubt he understood what Balaam meant by "God". All the king cared about was that now he had a chance for victory because the guy who can successfully curse people is in front of him. I picture this king thinking, "God shmoud, whatever. As long as you start cursing them."
 - c) Coming back to Balaam, did he know what he was going to say at this point? Doubt it.
 - i) I suspect that he was trusting that if God brought him this far, he would give him the words to say at the right moment.
 - d) This reminds me of a New Testament principal about speaking what God tells us to speak at the right moment. In Luke 21:14-15, Jesus tells the disciples not to worry about what to say ahead of time when they need to testify about him. My point in giving that reference here is I believe that Balaam had that same sort of trust in God.
 - i) Balaam is saying in effect, "If God has gotten me this far, then I am sure that when the actual moment comes to speak up for Him, He will give me the right words to say and I don't have to do anything to prepare for that moment."
 - ii) Does that mean we shouldn't have to study our bible? Of course not. Does that mean that if we give a sermon or a speech we should not prepare? Of course not. It just means that when comes the actual moment of speech, we have to trust that He is guiding what we are saying. Yes, we should still practice and prepare, but we should still allow for the possibility that God may change what He wants us to say at that exact moment. That in effect is how I write. I prepare, but I leave open the fact that I believe God is guiding me as I actually write these lessons.

22. Verse 39: Then Balaam went with Balak to Kiriath Huzoth. ⁴⁰ Balak sacrificed cattle and sheep, and gave some to Balaam and the princes who were with him. ⁴¹ The next morning Balak took Balaam up to Bamoth Baal, and from there he saw part of the people.
- a) Notice in these final two verses, who is doing the sacrifices: King Balak.
 - b) I suspect that Balak had the habit that sacrifices were made for the gods he worshipped and figured that it was necessary in order for Balaam to commence with the curse.
 - c) Verse 40 mentions that part of the sacrifices were given as food to Balaam and those who traveled with them. I don't know if this was a down payment or just dinner. ☺
 - d) The final verse of this chapter is about Balak taking Balaam to a look out point where he could get a view of the Israelites.
 - i) Remember that there were about two million Israelites out there. Unless one looked down on them from a helicopter, I doubt that one could easily see the entire group. However, this vantage point allowed them to see part of them.
 - e) OK, why is all of this necessary? I mean, we can sort of understand why the king wanted to sacrifice animals. That is what is normally done in that culture in order to show honor to the local gods or an important religious visitor like Balaam. The question is why was it necessary for Balaam to actually see the people in order to curse them?
 - i) King Balak could have said, "Here is your check, now start cursing." Maybe the king thought if that Balaam saw the size of this group, Balaam might realize how much trouble the king is in, and how much more he needed Balaam to curse them. Maybe the king thought the Israelites should be in sight so that when the cursing begins, so Balaam's god would know who he is cursing.
 - f) No matter what, the king is saying, "Here they are, now get going and earn your fee."
 - i) The actual statements of Balaam are the next two chapters of this book.
23. OK, John this is a cute story, especially the part about the talking donkey. Now tell me why I should care about any of this stuff? After all, I have enough in life to worry about then to care about ancient history and whether or not this guy actually put a spell on the Israelites.
- a) The answer is about realizing how God is working in the background of our lives. Just like the Israelites had no idea at the time all of this is taking place, so we don't know what events God is controlling in the background of our lives.
 - b) So how do we know He is working this sort of way in our lives? I've never had a talking donkey near me. How do I know this was not just for the Israelites back then?
 - c) Think of it this way: We live in a sinful world. We live in a world where demonic forces don't want us to make a difference for God in this world. If you want to see whether or not demonic forces are real, try making a difference for God and watch what happens.
 - i) Stories like this remind us that despite such demonic forces, the power that is within us, (a way of saying the Holy Spirit takes up residence inside of us) is greater than whatever forces are out there in the world. We don't know what is going to happen to us tomorrow, but God does. We have to trust that He in His own way is working in the background of our lives, so that we can use our lives to make that difference for Him. That is the underlying point of this story.
 - d) With that said, let me pray for a little boldness for all of us to make a difference for Him.
24. Heavenly Father, we usually don't realize the scope of what we have to face in life. We just see the situation in front of us and figure "that is all there is". Help us to remember that life is much bigger than what we see or deal with. Help us to remember that You are working in our lives in order for us to make a difference for You. Then, help us to draw upon Your power so that we can make that difference. Help us to remember that by drawing upon Your power, we can overcome any power or force that resists us from accomplishing what You want us to accomplish for You in this lifetime. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.