

Life Lesson 37
Balaam and the Donkey
Text: Numbers 22-24

Introduction

The children of Israel couldn't go into the promised land because of their unbelief. They spent years wandering around in land that belonged to other people. Our story today is about what happened when a king tried to get rid of them. God used some very surprising messengers to show that He was taking care of His people.

The Story

Balak, the king of Moab, was worried. Hordes of Israelites pitched their tents in his country. There were so many of them. They may have outnumbered his own people! What if they decided to attack? Balak decided to do something about them.

He sent for a prophet named Balaam. Balaam claimed to be a prophet of God, but his life didn't show it. He was a fortune-teller and claimed to be able to bless or to curse. Balak sent a message to Balaam asking him to come and curse the Israelites.

The king's messengers came to Balaam's house carrying treasures to pay Balaam, which Balaam was, no doubt, glad to see.

"Stay here tonight," Balaam said. "I will ask God and see what He says."

Balaam may have been surprised when the Lord DID speak to him that night.

"Don't go with those men and don't curse the Israelites. They are my people and I have blessed them," God told him.

"Go on home," Balaam told the messengers. "God told me not to come with you."

So far Balaam did what he ought to do, but the story isn't over yet.

Balak just couldn't take "no" for an answer. He sent more messengers with a bigger bribe.

"We'll give you every great honor we can think of," they told him. "We will give you whatever you want. Just come with us and curse these people."

"Stay tonight and I will ask God again," Balaam replied.

Do you think God would have changed his mind? No, and Balaam knew better, too. He didn't want to obey God. He wanted to get treasures and honor for himself. He asked God again if he could go.

God was angry with Balaam, but he told him he could go. "But only say what I tell you to say."

If Balaam cared about what God thought he would have told the messengers, "No and don't ask again." Instead he saddled up his donkey and went with the king's messengers.

God sent an angel to give Balaam a special warning. The angel stood in the way holding a sword, keeping Balaam from passing. Balaam didn't see the angel, but his donkey did. The donkey was frightened and turned aside into a field. Balaam whipped the poor donkey to make her get back on the path.

A little further on, though, the angel blocked the path again. This time there were walls beside the path and when the donkey tried to get away from the angel she crushed Balaam's foot against the wall. Now he was really mad at the donkey and gave her a hard whipping.

Once more the angel blocked the path. This time it was in a narrow place and there was no place at all for the donkey to run. When she saw the angel, she just fell down. Balaam figured he had enough trouble from that donkey and began beating her with his staff.

Here's the most surprising part of the whole story. God opened the donkey's mouth so that she could say what she must have been wanting to tell him all along.

"What have I done that you've beaten me these three times?" she asked him.

Would you be surprised if an animal suddenly spoke to you? Balaam was so surprised that he answered her before he thought.

"I'm so mad at you for the way you've acted on this trip that I'd just kill you if I had a sword," he said.

"I have served you ever since you bought me," the donkey replied. "Have I ever acted this way before."

"Well, no," Balaam answered. Then God opened Balaam's eyes so that he could see what the donkey saw. An angel stood in front of him with a sword in his hand.

"Why did you hit your donkey?" the angel asked Balaam. "I was all ready to slay you with my sword. If she hadn't turned away, I would have killed you."

"I have sinned," Balaam cried. "I didn't know you stood there. If you don't want me to go, I will go right back home."

"Go ahead," the angel told him. "But don't you dare say a word except for what the Lord tells you."

Perhaps Balaam had been planning on cursing God's people anyway, or at least pretending to curse them. After this experience, he decided to only say what God said to say. Now he was more afraid of God than he was of King Balak.

"What took you so long?" Balak asked Balaam.

“I have come, but I’m only going to say what God tells me to say,” he replied.

Balak made an offering of cattle and sheep to his god, Baal. Then he took Balaam up to a high mountain where he could see God’s people, the Israelites.

God told Balaam what to say. Instead of cursing the people, he blessed them.

“What are you doing?” Balak cried. “I’m paying you to curse these people, not bless them.”

Three times Balak tried to get Balaam to curse the people. Three times he blessed them instead. At last Balak gave up and sent Balaam home.

The Life Lesson

Balaam was mighty silly, wasn’t he, for asking God if he could do something he know God wouldn’t like. If something is wrong, we shouldn’t even think about it. We should just not do it. We can also see from this story that no one is greater than God. If God is for us and blesses us, it doesn’t matter at all who is against us. God is the most powerful.

Do you have a pet? If it could talk like Balaam’s donkey, what would it say to you? I hope it wouldn’t say, “Why didn’t you feed me yesterday? I was sure hungry,” or “It hurts when you play so rough with me.”

How about that stray dog or cat that hangs around the house or the church? Would it say, “I was so hungry and lonely, and when you kicked me, I just wished I could die.”

The angel was concerned about the donkey. God is concerned about how you treat animals, too. Let’s obey God and be kind to people and to animals, too.

Review Questions

What king wanted to have the Israelites cursed?

King Balak of Moab

What false prophet did King Balak pay to curse the Israelites?

Balaam

Did God want Balaam to go curse the Israelites?

No

How did God warn Balaam the first time?

In a dream.

How did God warn Balaam as he went with Balak's men?

He sent an angel to block his path.

Who saw the angel?

The donkey

What did the donkey do when he saw the angel?

First she ran off into a field, then she crushed Balaam's foot against a wall, and then she fell down.

What did Balaam do when his donkey wouldn't go along the path?

He beat her.

What did the donkey say to Balaam?

Why are you hitting me? Haven't I served you well all these years?

What did Balaam do when he saw the angel?

He fell down in fear and agreed to not curse God's people.

Did Balaam curse the Israelites?

No, he blessed them.