

## ***People on the Move: The Book of Numbers*** ***The “Madness” of the Prophet***

Lesson #10 for December 5, 2009

Scriptures: Numbers 22-24; Deuteronomy 1:30; 20:4; Matthew 15:14; 1 Corinthians 2:14; 2 Peter 2:14-16; Revelation 13:17.

1. This lesson focuses on the greed of Balaam and its baleful results—from being a prophet of the true God to dying with the unrighteous.
2. Why is the story of Balaam included in our Scriptures? How did Moses get the details of that story? The Israelites were not even supposed to know about any of it! Did God reveal all of those details to Moses in a vision? Moses recorded Balaam’s prophecies at length in poetic form.
3. Balaam has become a symbol or “proverb” for greed. The story of Balaam also teaches us some very important things about God. If we persist in wanting to go our own way, God will eventually allow us to do so.
4. Look at the passages in the New Testament referring to Balaam. (2 Peter 2:15,16; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14) What do those passages imply about Balaam and his weaknesses and the result of his activities? Balaam is known in the Scriptures for two sins. The first is portrayed in Numbers 22-24. This is the story that we will focus on in our lesson. Balaam is also responsible for a much greater sin—a sin which has been pretty much kept in the shadows. After returning home he went back again to the Moabite king and convinced the leaders there that the only way to conquer the children of Israel was to lead them into sin. As a result in cooperation with the Moabites, the Midianite women carried their pagan fertility-cult religion quietly into the camp of Israel until idolatry and immorality became a major sin. As a result, 24,000 of the Israelites died. (Numbers 25:9) Balaam was not only guilty of an enormous amount of greed hoping to benefit himself from the results of that sin, but also was willing to sacrifice God’s people by leading them into sin—actually doing the work of Satan! Balaam has been an example of a person controlled by sin to the extent that he brought about the destruction of 24,000 Israelites. Therefore, for the Jewish people, Balaam has become a symbol—the personification of evil.
5. Try to put yourself in the position of King Balak of Moab. He had watched the children of Israel destroy the Canaanites to the south. Then he saw them travel around Edom, Ammon, and his own country of Moab and destroy two very powerful nations to the north of him—nations who had proven their superiority to him by conquering a portion of his own territory. And those invading forces of Israel were camped on his “back porch.” (Numbers 21:1) Balak was particularly concerned because of what they had done to the Amorites to his north. From a human standpoint, what options did Balak have available to him? Should he have negotiated with the Israelites? If he had sent even one messenger to the Israelites, wouldn’t they have told him that they had no intention of fighting against him? Moses could have told him clearly that God had forbidden them to attack him. (Deuteronomy 2:8,9) Remember that the Moabites (descendants of Lot) and the Ammonites (descendants of Lot) as well as the Edomites (descendants of Esau) and the Midianites (descendants of Abraham through Keturah, his wife after Sarah died) were all distant relatives of the Israelites, but the Amorites were not relatives of the Israelites.
6. How do you suppose Balak knew about Balaam who lived about five hundred miles away near the Euphrates River? Did he recognize that Balaam was a true prophet of Yahweh, the God of the Israelites? Is that why he called for Balaam? Balak had many of his own “holy

men,” prophets of his own “gods,” Chemosh and Baal. Why didn’t he ask one of them to curse Israel? Or had he already done that? Did he believe that his “gods” were inadequate to deal with Yahweh? Did Balak have some information about Balaam “going bad”?

7. In any case, Balak called for Balaam. Do we know anything about Balaam’s life before that call? Except for the comments by Ellen White, we know nothing. How did a prophet of Yahweh come to be located in Mesopotamia near the city of Babylon? What did he do there? Did Yahweh try through Balaam to get the people of Mesopotamia to worship Him?
8. When the first group of dignitaries from Balak arrived at Balaam’s home, what should Balaam have said? Had God revealed to him that those dignitaries were coming? Didn’t Balaam recognize immediately when they presented their request that God would forbid him from carrying out such a mission? What did Balaam think he would accomplish by dallying with that temptation? Did he think that somehow he could get God to change His mind? Did he think that he could obey God’s commands and still receive Balak’s reward? At the beginning did he have any idea where playing with temptation would lead him?
9. How often do we play with temptation? When we are tempted, instead of immediately dismissing any possibility of the temptation, do we think about it and rationalize until we give in to the sin?
10. What did Balaam invite the dignitaries to do? In the morning Balaam had to tell the dignitaries that it was impossible for him to go and do what they had asked. (Numbers 22:7-21)
11. As might be expected, Balak assumed that his bribes were not large enough or his dignitaries were not persuasive enough to get Balaam to comply. So, he sent a second group more powerful and with promises of greater riches to entice him. What happened when that second group of dignitaries arrived at Balaam’s home?
12. Once again, Balaam prayed to God for instructions. That time, God told him that he was granted the privilege of going *if* the dignitaries came to him in the morning and asked him to go with them. Nevertheless, he would only be allowed to speak the words which God would give him. Notice these interesting words from Ellen White regarding what happened in the morning:

Balaam had received permission to go with the messengers from Moab *if* they came in the morning to call him. But, annoyed at his delay, and expecting another refusal, they set out on their homeward journey without further consultation with him. Every excuse for complying with the request of Balak had now been removed. But Balaam was determined to secure the reward; and, taking the beast upon which he was accustomed to ride, he set out on the journey. He feared that even now the divine permission might be withdrawn, and he pressed eagerly forward, impatient lest he should by some means fail to gain the coveted reward. {*Patriarchs and Prophets* 441.2}

13. Three times on the way to Moab an angel stood in front of the donkey preventing him from progressing. (Numbers 22:22-35) The first time, the donkey merely turned aside into a field. The second time, the donkey pressed Balaam’s foot against a stone fence trying to get out of the angel’s way. On the third occasion, the donkey was passing through a narrow area walled up on both sides, and the donkey simply sat down, not knowing what to do. At that point the donkey spoke to Balaam and Balaam answered him. Look at that conversation recorded in Numbers 22:28-30 and the subsequent discussion with the angel recorded in Numbers 22:31-35. Balaam was on a journey to “curse” and “destroy” millions of God’s people, and yet, he was holding a conversation with a donkey! And he could not even kill the

donkey! How many times did Balaam need to be told by God that he should not have gone on that journey?

14. If Balaam had not been absolutely determined to get his reward, what should he have done at that point. Was Balaam still pursuing the men from Moab on those three occasions when his donkey saw the angel? Or, did that happen after he was traveling in their presence?
15. Read Balaam's "curses" in Numbers 23-24. After reaching the country of Moab and offering numerous sacrifices, Balaam uttered a marvelous blessing on the children of Israel. Balak was bitterly disappointed. He then took Balaam to an area where he could see only a portion of the encampment of Israel—hoping that Balaam would be able to curse a portion of the children of Israel. The result was another blessing. Then, Balak took Balaam to one of his pagan temples at Baal-Peor (remember this name for our lesson next week) where they offered more sacrifices. Was Balak hoping that his "gods," Chemosh and Baal, would somehow influence Balaam's God or perhaps Balaam himself to curse Israel from that site? In any case, the result was another even more glorious blessing on Israel. (Numbers 24:1-13) Why would God even speak to Balaam at that point? (See 4SG 47,48) Think of the incredible patience of God that He continued to try to work with Balaam and even with Balak and the people of Moab.
16. One of the things that Balaam prayed for was that he might "die the death of the righteous." What does that mean? (See 1 Corinthians 15:51-54; Romans 3:20-24) In what sense could we die the death of the righteous? Are any of us righteous naturally? Have any of us earned the status of "righteous people"? Can we become "righteous" in God's eyes? Ellen White indicates that in one of his visions, Balaam actually "saw" the "heavenly Canaan." (*Patriarchs and Prophets* 447.3) With such a vision in his mind, how could he continue to act contrary to the will of God?
17. Read Numbers 24:15-25. What king did Balaam see in vision? Which king of Israel managed to conquer Moab, Edom, and even the Amalekites? Is that a prophecy of Jesus? Or, is that a prophecy of King David?
18. Eventually, however, the one true righteous King will sit on His throne and descend from heaven in the new Jerusalem at the third coming and "every knee will bow." (Isaiah 45:23; Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:10,11) That victory will be the final one. Never again will God's kingdom be opposed here on this earth or anywhere else in the universe.
19. Consider briefly the stories of other Bible characters who were as greedy as was Balaam. What about Achan? (Joshua 6-7) Gehazi? (2 Kings 5) Judas? (John 13) Review the stories of each of those greedy men. Achan and his family were stoned. Gehazi ended up with Naaman's leprosy. Judas hanged himself. What should that tell us?
20. Greed and covetousness are such evils that they led Satan to rebel in heaven in the beginning. They are spelled out in the tenth commandment which Paul suggested is the root of our committing the sins spelled out in the other nine commandments. (Romans 7:7-11) Why are covetousness and greed such a problem for human beings and for angels? Why is it so hard for us to overcome our native selfishness and learn to love as God loves?
21. As we will learn in our next lesson, after going back home without his reward, Balaam returned to Balak on his own. He suggested that the only way to lead the children of Israel into destruction was to get them to sin. How could a prophet of God have sunk so low? He was serving the cause of Satan.
22. How many of us are secretly being overcome by selfishness, greed, and covetousness on a daily basis?

God does not regard all sins as of equal magnitude; there are degrees of guilt in His estimation, as well as in that of man; but however trifling this or that wrong act may seem in the eyes of men, no sin is small in the sight of God. Man's judgment is partial, imperfect; but God estimates all things as they really are. The drunkard is despised and is told that his sin will exclude him from heaven; while **pride, selfishness, and covetousness too often go unrebuked. But these are sins that are especially offensive to God; for they are contrary to the benevolence of His character**, to that unselfish love which is the very atmosphere of the unfallen universe. He who falls into some of the grosser sins may feel a sense of his shame and poverty and his need of the grace of Christ; but pride feels no need, and so it closes the heart against Christ and the infinite blessings He came to give. {*Steps to Christ* 30.1}

How could pride and selfishness in the life of a "good" man be worse than someone lying in the gutter, "pickling" his brain with alcohol, thinking only of how he can get his next drink? Is it not that pride—as Ellen White suggests—"feels no need"? Remember the story of the Pharisee and the publican. (Luke 18:9-14)

Many of us would love to be able to separate cause from effect. If we could, then we could do our selfish things without losing the kingdom of God! But, it is impossible to separate cause from effect. Let us take a serious warning from these stories.

**© 2009, Kenneth Hart, MD, MA, MPH. Permission is hereby granted for any noncommercial use of these materials. Free distribution is encouraged. It is our goal to see them spread as widely and freely as possible. If you would like to use them for your class or even make copies of portions of them, feel free to do so. We always enjoy hearing about how you might be using the materials and we might even want to share good ideas with others, so let us know.** [Info@theox.org](mailto:Info@theox.org)

Last Modified: November 14, 2009

C:\WP\SS\TG-Hart\Numbers\SS-10-Numbers-2009\_12\_12-2009\_10\_03-Fin+.wpd