

TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD WHO RULES OVER EVIL FOR THE GOOD OF HIS PEOPLE

Numbers 22:15-35

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever feared the harm that another person might bring to you because they disliked you for some reason? In other words have you ever had an enemy whom you feared would harm you? While I don't think most of us live in fear of others harming us on a regular basis, yet I do know that some of us do regularly fear being harmed by another person. This last week two men shared with me about individuals associated with their employment who have harmed them and are threatening more harm. As we saw last week, each person in here who is a Christian should know that the "world" system over which Satan rules and from which Christ saved us hates us because it hates him. While we certainly don't live in a society where we might be openly persecuted or killed for our faith, yet there is an underlying hostility to us as Christians which sometimes breaks out into acts of intimidation or mockery or ostracism or insult. When we add to the list of potential threats posed by personal enemies and the world system the fact of criminals and careless drivers and negligent doctors and distracted airplane mechanics and incompetent engineers and drug impaired machine operators, the world we live in can be a very threatening place. We don't have to look very far to find someone to fear.

As many of you know the Bible is littered with commands that we, the people of God are to not be afraid, especially we are not to fear other human beings. Jesus himself commands us, "Do not fear those who can only kill the body." However it is one thing to be told not to fear when you have no enemies; it is another thing to be told not to fear when faced with an unjust lawsuit by a vicious former employee or to not fear when you have to go to work every day and face a hostile co-worker or live with an angry and abusive spouse or a belligerent and disobedient teenager or have an angry alcoholic as a neighbor. It is because the threats we face are real that God has told us this weird little story about the super-prophet Balaam and his talking donkey.

The nation Israel, camped on the eastern shore of the Jordan River, across from the Canaanite city of Jericho did not know that any of the events in chapters 22-24 were taking place when they were actually happening. They knew they were surrounded by real and potential enemies, yet they had no idea of Balak's hatred and his plan to destroy them. They did not know about Balaam and his plan to curse them. They did not learn of this story until well after the events recorded here. God included this "behind-the-scenes" story of how he dealt with these evil men, intent on bringing harm to Israel without their knowledge to show them and us how he is working everything out for our good. This story is given to us so that we will not fear men.

MAIN POINT

We can be fearless because God rules over evil for the eternal benefit of his people by...

I. Declaring his people blessed (v.12)

We will begin by remembering what God told the prophet Balaam the first time Balak, King of Moab sent a delegation to obtain his services in cursing Israel. God told Balaam (v.12) that he was not to go with them and he was not to curse them because God himself had blessed them. How had God blessed them? First, he had chosen them out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his treasured possession. Second, he had made a promise to them to make them into a great nation, to bless all the nations of the world through them, to give them the land of Canaan. Third, he had saved them out of their slavery in Egypt, delivering them, not only from their oppressors by mighty plagues but also from the angel of death through the blood of a year old, unblemished lamb who came to live with them in each of their homes. Fourth, he had given them his law and provided the tabernacle and the priesthood and sacrifices so he could live in their midst. Fifth, he had led them through the wilderness these 40 years, feeding them with manna and giving them water from the rock and defeating their enemies.

Everything God did for Israel was a preparation for and a foreshadowing of the ultimate blessing of salvation that God has provided in and through the mighty work of Jesus Christ. Listen to how the apostle Paul begins to describe the blessing of salvation that has come to all who are in Christ in Ephesians 1:3-7, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace...”

The “us” who are blessed by God in Christ are all those who have faith in Jesus, as Paul makes clear later in his letter to the Ephesians. So friends this morning I have really good news for you. You can be sure that you are an object of God’s blessing if you will stop trusting in your own goodness and your own religious and moral performance and stop trusting in all your plans to find a happy life on planet earth and trust only in Jesus Christ as the one who has done everything for you so that you can be the recipient of God’s love and kindness forever. Everyone who has abandoned their demand to be treated well in this world and has embraced Christ and his saving work as their only hope has been blessed by God forever. So I urge you, right now, freely acknowledge your wickedness to God and trust this great and mighty savior of sinners, the Lord Jesus Christ. If you are a believer in Jesus then this story of God’s rule over evil is for you. You are going to see how God is working right now on your behalf to rule over and through all the evil plans of men and demons against you. Friends, for all who are trusting in Christ, there is no need to fear anyone or anything because our God rules over all of our enemies to bring us safely into his eternal kingdom.

II. Exposing the evil that is in men (vv.15-22a)

King Balak has sent a second delegation to persuade the reluctant prophet to come and curse Israel so that he can destroy them. He essentially gives to Balaam a blank check. He tells him he will do for him whatever he wants if he will come and curse Israel. Look at how Balaam responds to this amazing offer in v. 18, “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the LORD my God to do less or more.” It sounds like Balaam got the message and he is going to obey the Lord; he will not go with them and he will not curse Israel. However, the next thing he says shows that his commitment to obey God is not as firm as his words might lead us to believe. He tells the princes of Moab that they should remain the night and he will see what more the Lord will say to him. God has already made clear his will in the matter and he will never change his mind. Israel cannot be cursed because God has blessed them. There is nothing more to be said. Balaam proves by his actions that he does not mean what he says. But, like hypocritical Israel promising to obey everything the Lord says and then worshipping a golden calf only days later, so Balaam declares his loyalty to the Lord while plotting a way to get the loot.

At first it appears that God is just like the capricious pagan gods with whom Balaam is used to dealing. It sounds as if the Lord changes his mind and lets him go. However, on closer inspection God’s answer to Balaam’s request to go is full of sarcasm and irony (v.20). He does not tell him to go but challenges to consider what he is about to do. Let me give you an expanded paraphrase of v. 20. Here is what the Lord is saying to Balaam, “Since these men (notice, not princes) have come to invite you to go with them to curse Israel, whom I have said will never be cursed, well sure, then why don’t you arise and go with them. Why don’t you go see how that turns out for you. But you can be sure of this: what I say that is what you will do.”

Here are three things that tell us that in v. 20 the Lord is not telling him to go but sarcastically challenging him as to whom he will obey: the Lord or these men. First, notice what Balaam does not do or say the next morning. He does not tell Balak’s delegation what transpired with the Lord (v. 21). Unlike the first time he says nothing but simply gets up and goes with them. He doesn’t say to them, “I will go with you but you need to know that I will not curse Israel but will only bless them.” By his silence he communicates to the king’s delegation that he has settled the issue with the Lord that had prevented him from coming the first time. He believes he has won.

Second, in v. 22 we are told that God's anger is kindled against Balaam because he went. Thus, you can be sure that God's words in v. 20 were clearly not permission to go. God's anger is only kindled against people who disobey his commands. He was challenging Balaam in a way that exposed his wicked, evil heart. Balaam's actions prove that he loves money, not the Lord, no matter what he has said. Third, Balaam's actions are referred to in Deuteronomy 23 and Joshua 24 and in both cases we are told that it was Balaam's intention to curse Israel but that the Lord would not listen to him but instead turned his curse into blessing.

The similarities between Balaam and Judas, the betrayer of Jesus, are remarkable. Both of these men talk as if they are loyal followers of the Lord. But both of them, for financial gain, aim to disobey and betray the Lord and his saving purposes. Both of these men believe that they have the power to deceive and betray God. They both assume that they are in charge and can do what they please. They both, like the wicked man who says there is no God in Psalm 10:11, say in their heart, "God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never see it." But in both cases they are exposed for the wicked men they are by the Lord. Here God exposes Balaam by providing him with the opportunity to go if he wants. Jesus exposes Judas during the Last Supper by announcing his betrayal and then looking right at him and saying, "What you are going to do, do quickly." God knows every evil plan and purpose of men and demons and he is paying attention. Nobody is going to catch him by surprise. He is in the business of exposing the wicked in his time and in his way. We really do not need to be afraid. God is in charge and he will expose everything in its time. Balaam thinks he is headed to riches, confident of his ability to outwit the Lord. God has just exposed him for the hypocrite that he is.

III. Crushing human pride and pretension (vv.22b-30)

In order to fully understand what is about to happen we must remember what king Balak said about Balaam back in v. 6. Balak in his original appeal to Balaam to come curse Israel said, "... for I know that he whom you bless is blessed and he whom you curse is cursed." It is not only Balak that believes in Balaam's powerful tongue but Balaam himself believes in his power. God aims to show Balaam whose word will stand, whose plan will come to fruition. We know, when we hear the phrase, "the anger of the Lord was kindled" that Balaam is in trouble. This phrase always indicates God's just anger towards those who disobey him and signifies his determination to justly punish those who disobey.

So the Lord sent his angel to be an adversary against Balaam and he stood on the road, blocking the way for Balaam to travel. The angel stood with his sword drawn, waiting to ambush and kill Balaam. The female donkey upon which Balaam rode saw the fierce angel of Yahweh and turned aside into the field. Super-prophet Balaam did not see the angel and it was only by beating his donkey that he was able to get her to go back on the road. But once again, the angel confronted Balaam, this time where the road passed between two walled vineyards. The donkey, to escape the angel, pressed Balaam's foot against the wall as she tried to go around. Once again, the blind prophet beat his donkey. Finally, the angel took his stand at a place where the donkey could not turn aside and could not go around and so the seeing donkey laid down. This time, the anger of Balaam was kindled and the sightless prophet once again cruelly beat the donkey.

Now God crushes the prophet and forces him to bow the knee by opening the mouth of the donkey to speak. The donkey said to Balaam: "What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?" Balaam is so blinded by his passions that he does not pause to wonder how it is that his donkey is speaking. Rather he irately replies, "Because you have made a fool of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you." I hope you can see the irony in that statement. There is an unsheathed sword close at hand, which Balaam cannot see and it is not unsheathed to kill the donkey but him. The donkey asks a wise and revealing question and in asking, shuts the prophet's mouth "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?" The blindness of the prophet is complete. Not only can he not see the angel but he could not see a sign of danger in the strange behavior of his donkey and even now, with a speaking donkey he still does not perceive the danger.

The blindness of human beings in their natural condition is complete. All of us were born blind to what is blazing before our eyes. In Romans 1 Paul tells us that the entire creation is speaking to us, declaring to us the greatness and glory of the invisible creator God. But we, though seeing do not see and so we do not rejoice in this great God and we do not thank him but rather we worship the creation. We love money, not God. We love the admiration of others, not the creator. We hear creation speak in earthquakes and tsunamis but do not hear the warning of worse to come and so repent of our many sins. Rather we speculate about how much greater must the sins of others be for such devastations to come upon them or we simply rejoice it did not happen to us. Friends, the invisible God is speaking to us through everything that is happening, revealing his greatness and warning us of worse to come. Don't remain in proud blindness but cry out for his mercy.

See how the Lord crushes this man's pride and pretension. The all seeing prophet is blind while the donkey can see. The nation cursing prophet can only make the donkey obey by beating her. The prophet who supposedly has the power to bless and curse with his mouth is powerless to harm the donkey but can only wish for a sword. The prophet whose power is supposedly in his tongue is rebuked by the speech of a female donkey. This is probably the funniest story in the Bible. It is full of sarcasm and irony. God mocks the proud who oppose him and his people. As we are told in Psalm 2 about all those who rebel against him and oppose him, "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision." Or as we are told in Psalm 37:12-13, "The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him, but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming." God often frustrates the plans of his and our enemies in this life and will without question humble the pride of every enemy of his in the last judgment. All who refuse to bow the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ in this life will be rebuked to their face, not by a donkey but by the king and judge of all men, Jesus, on that last day.

IV. Using the evil actions of evil men to do his good will (vv.31-35)

Now the Lord opens the eyes of the super-prophet Balaam so that he can see what his donkey could always see, the angel of the Lord standing in the way with his sword drawn. Friends, do not miss the sovereign grace of God shown to us here. It is God alone who makes the blind to see and thus if you see the greatness of your sin and the greatness of Christ as a savior from sin, do not be proud but humbly give thanks that God did not leave you in your blindness. When Balaam sees the angel he does the only rational thing a human can do when confronted with the divine majesty; he fell on his face, cowering in fear before the Lord's angel. Now the Lord speaks through his angel to this hypocritical man. The Lord informs Balaam that he has known all along the perverseness of his plan. He knows that Balaam intends to curse. The Lord knows the secrets of Balaam's heart and so he cannot escape. Then, the humiliation of the proud prophet is complete as the angel informs Balaam that the dumb beast whom he wanted to kill is the agent of his salvation (v.33). God uses the weak things of this world to shame the proud. He brings salvation through a despised and crucified savior.

Balaam's response (v.34) to the angel is yet again another example of human hypocrisy. A superficial reading of the verse might lead you to believe that Balaam has repented, that he is a changed man. Nothing could be further from the truth. Look at what he says and does not say. First he says "I have sinned" but then notice how he knows he has sinned. "I have sinned because I did not know that you stood in the road against me." That is the same thing as the arrested and cuffed bank robber saying to the bank teller, "I'm sorry I pulled a gun on you and demanded all your money because I didn't know that the police were waiting right outside the door for me." In other words, "I'm sorry I tried to rob the bank because I got caught." If Balaam was truly confessing his sin he would have said, "I have sinned because I planned to curse the people you have blessed." He is sorry because he got caught not because he was disobeying the great king. Second he says, "if it is evil in your sight, I will turn back." "If it is evil in your sight!!!"—really, that's all he can say? Of course it is evil in God's sight, he has already said so. What he should have said, if he were truly repentant, "Since it is evil in your sight I will go home." Balaam is not a changed man.

But now notice what the Lord tells Balaam. He now tells the prophet who can see the angel of Yahweh with his drawn sword that he can go with Balak's men and when he gets there he will say only what the Lord tells him to

say. But how can the Lord trust this evil man? How can he send such an evil person to do his good will? First, we know from v. 27 when we were informed that Balaam's anger was kindled against the donkey that there is some kind of an analogy being made between Balaam and the donkey. Just as Yahweh's anger was kindled against Balaam so Balaam's was kindled against the donkey. Here is the point: the donkey, because it could see the angel refused to respond to the beatings of the prophet. This happened three times. In the next two chapters Balaam is going to be beaten by Balak the king of Moab three times because he does not curse Israel but blesses Israel. The beatings he administers will be the withholding of large quantities of cash. However, each time Balaam will bless and not curse, in spite of Balak's beatings, just like the donkey three times turned out of the way to avoid the angel. Why will he do it? He does not do it because he loves Yahweh. He desperately wants to obtain the money. However, he can see the angel of the Lord standing with his sword drawn and knows that if he curses he is a dead man. He wants to curse because he wants the money but he does not curse but only blesses because he wants to live more than he wants the money. Thus, God rules over the evil will of this evil man to accomplish his good and perfect will.

In a similar way God ruled over the evil will of Judas in such a way that Judas by his cursing of Christ, his betrayal of him perfectly fulfilled God's good will to have Christ crucified and thus bring the blessing of salvation to all of those who believe. While Judas' betrayal of Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures and carried out God's good and perfect will, yet Judas was guilty of great evil and is justly suffering in hell now for his evil betrayal. This is one of the mysteries of God's rule over his world. God rules over evil in such a way that all the evil that is done in this world accomplishes his perfect and good will and yet God never causes evil but men and demons are justly punished for the evil we do. Therefore, we do not need to fear evil men and demons but rather we can courageously oppose them because whatever evil they do to us will result in our eternal joy and their eternal condemnation because God rules over evil.

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