

# **TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD WHO IS WORKING OUT HIS PLAN Numbers 23:27-24:25**

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the past few months we have witnessed anew the inability of humans to control their own destiny, to fulfill their plans and dreams. Some 200 farmers in Missouri this last week had all their plans for bountiful harvests washed away as the Army Corp of Engineers blew a hole in a levee to let some of the flooded Mississippi River spread out and thus keep Cairo, IL from flooding. 2 months ago tens of thousands of Japanese were living out the plans they had for their day when an earthquake struck just off the coast of Japan and then 15 minutes later a giant tsunami obliterated all their plans, not just for the day but for their lives. Also last week over 300 people had their plans ended when they were killed by tornadoes which also altered the plans of tens of thousands of people in the southern US as homes and businesses and even some towns were wiped off the map.

Human inability to bring plans to fruition is not only demonstrated by these massive disasters but also in the experiences of our daily lives. On this Mother's Day we ought to remember that for all the hard work and love that moms expend in the raising of their children, they are not truly in control of what their children will become or what will happen to them. More than a few mothers have been profoundly disappointed when their plans for their children's lives did not turn out as hoped. Illness and accident and economic downturns and faithless spouses and personal weaknesses and sins all interfere with and foil our best laid plans. It is simply a fundamental fact of human existence that we do not have the ability to guarantee that our hopes and desires and plans for the future will be accomplished.

People respond to the uncertainty of life in various ways. Many play it safe and make no plans, take no risks, circle the wagons and put up as many defenses as possible to avoid the pain of disappointment and failure. We buy insurance, manage our diet, save our money, keep the kids close to home, wear helmets, avoid relationships outside the family—in short we minimize risk and keep our plans manageable. Fear dominates the lives of some and so motivates a preoccupation with vain attempts to control the uncontrollable. Others live as though they are in control of their destiny. They make bold plans for the future as if there were no limits to what they can accomplish. Pride dominates their lives and motivates an overconfidence in their ability to accomplish all they desire. They agree with what the British poet, William Ernest Henley wrote in his poem, "Invictus" (which is Latin for "unconquered"), "It matters not how strait the gate, How charged with punishments the scroll. I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul."

Both of these reactions can be seen in the people of Israel as they come out of their slavery in Egypt. Most of the time, as they are faced with the hardships of desert living and then faced with the task of defeating the inhabitants of Canaan, they want to retreat, to return to the safety and certainty of slavery in Egypt. Like the donkey Eyr in "Winnie the Pooh" they are sure that they will either die of starvation or thirst or they will be slaughtered by the giants who live in Canaan. Thus the only safety they can imagine is the security of the status quo, slavery in Egypt. On other occasions, they decide to make plans and to take action but contrary to the plans of God. They have the bright idea to build a golden calf and worship it when their leader Moses fails to return from the mountain according to their timetable. Later, after being rebuked by God through Moses for listening to the 10 spies who predict defeat at the hands of the Canaanites and after God commands them to turn back into the desert, they decide to attack the Canaanites in direct opposition to God's clear instructions. In both cases their plans meet with defeat and destruction.

Now they are poised on the edge of the Land of Promise. At the moment, their plan is God's plan, to enter that land and to conquer the wicked nations that inhabit it and take it over as their very own land. However, having read their history up to this point we can have no confidence that they are going to carry through with the plans God has for them. It is not hard to imagine that there is more than a little fear among them. We can picture at

least some of them counseling a more cautious approach to the conquest of the land. It is not hard to envision some of them advocating a bolder plan that differs from God's plan. Thus it is easy to see why God wanted them and us to know about this attempt by Balak, the king of Moab, to get Balaam to curse Israel. This story is a wonderful antidote to both fear and pride as it assures us and warns us that while we are not in control of the future, while we are unable to implement our plans, yet God is working all the time to fulfill his plans. We can rest assured that in and over and with and through all the details of our lives God is at work to bring to completion his plan for his universe and for his people. That is the message of this passage.

## MAIN POINT

**Right now God is working out his plan to...**

### **I. Frustrate the plans of the wicked (23:27-24:1-4, 10-16, 25)**

Both King Balak and the hypocritical sorcerer Balaam would agree with the poet Henley that they are indeed masters of their fate. Balak is sure that his money and his extravagant offerings will obligate the divine power to do his bidding, which is to curse Israel. Balaam is confident of his ability to manipulate the divine being by his occult practices and thus to obtain the handsome payment that Balak has offered. However, as he did the first two times these men offered their sacrifices, God overrules both of these men's plans and aspirations. After moving to a third high point from which Balaam is able to see the entire camp of Israel and offering all the same extravagant offerings (23:27-30) the full hypocrisy of Balaam is revealed and the complete power of God over the false prophet is shown. In v. 1 we are told that on this third occasion Balaam does not leave Balak standing by his offerings and go off by himself. He does not use any of the occult practices of divination which he used on the other two occasions. Rather, God's Holy Spirit completely takes over his person and he becomes the voice of God, speaking words he would never want to speak. He falls into a prophetic, visionary trance and announces God's word to Balak.

I think most of us presume, because of the movies we have watched, that when God speaks through one of his prophets he does so by putting him or her into a trance. However, there are only a few times in the Bible when people are placed by God into a trance-like-state in which visions are seen. On at least two of the recorded occasions of people falling into a prophetic trance the person upon whom the HS comes is not a believer, but an enemy of God. This is one of them. (The other is when King Saul is in the midst of pursuing God's chosen king, David, to kill him and is overcome by the Holy Spirit and placed in a prophetic trance so that David has time to escape, 1 Samuel 19:20-24.). Balaam describes this experience in vv. 3-4 and 15-16. The Holy Spirit of God is enabling him to see in his inner person a vision of the future. He falls down with his eyes uncovered to the future plans of God.

After Balaam finishes his third prophetic blessing of Israel, Balak's anger is kindled against Balaam (v.10), just as Balaam's anger had been kindled against the disobedient but seeing donkey. Balak is furious because his plans to curse and conquer Israel have been thwarted. He mocks Balaam and the God to whom Balaam has listened so foolishly. He punishes Balaam, as Balaam had punished the donkey, by refusing to pay him for his trouble. He blames the Lord for his not keeping his promise to pay Balaam. Here is a clear way to know that the plans you have been following are your own and not God's. You get mad and you punish others and blame God when the things you desired do not happen. When the vacation didn't go the way you envisioned; when the marriage isn't all you had hoped; when the children don't turn out as you planned; when the job isn't as fulfilling or economically rewarding as you anticipated; when illness halts your retirement plans—how do you react? If you get mad and blame others, especially if you blame God, you can be sure that your heart was not set on God and his plans. You can be sure that you were trusting in your abilities to achieve what you desired and not trusting God to work out his perfect plan for you.

Balaam, for his part, maintains his hypocritical stance and attempts to guilt Balak into paying up, even though he didn't deliver the results that Balak wanted. Balaam argues that he has been up front from the beginning and has done as Balak has asked and therefore, he ought to be paid. He told the first delegation of Balak's messengers that it didn't matter what Balak offered him, he could only speak what the Lord told him to speak

and he has done exactly what he said. He is accusing Balak of injustice for not paying him even though he has never been fully honest with Balak. He never told Balak that what he wanted could never happen. He never informed him of the incident with the talking donkey and the fierce angel with drawn sword. Like all hypocrites, which, by the way, includes all of us, he uses religious language to cover up his true motives and beliefs. He wanted money and he believed he had the ability to overcome God's determination to bless Israel, yet he talks as though he is loyal to God. Thus we see in the last verse both of these wicked men go their own way with their plans for evil frustrated by the sovereign Lord of the universe.

One of the clearest messages of the Bible is that the plans of sinful men will always turn to dust. Even if it may appear that the wicked flourish for a time, yet in the end, all their planning and plotting will come to nothing, ended by the fact of death and then judgment by a holy and good God. The only sane way to live is by admitting we are weak and dependent creatures whose only hope lies in submitting to God and his plans because it is only the plans of the Almighty God that will stand. To live as if we can control our destiny or keep all danger and uncertainty at bay; to live as if we are the architects of our own lives when all is gift and we control nothing is to live a life that will end in eternal frustration. As the psalmist says in Psalm 33:10-11, "The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations."

## **II. Multiply, prosper and protect his church (vv. 5-9)**

The first line of Balaam's prophecy immediately causes us a problem. Verses 5-6 describe the beauty and prosperity and fertility of the physical nation of Israel camped on the plains of Moab. However, if you are paying attention you will note that I am saying this prophetic word is a description of the church of Jesus. How can I say that? Before I explain why it is right to read these words as referring to the church of Jesus I need to answer those of you who don't care why this refers to the church and not Israel. Some of you have your minds made up about the meaning of life and who God is and what he is like and what it means to be saved and your ideas have only a very superficial connection to the Bible. You come to church to be "inspired"; you don't want to be confused by the facts. Listen, God is a real person. He is not whatever you think about him. The only way to know him, just like the only way to know a human person is to listen to what he says about himself and to observe what it is that he has done and is doing. The only true and living God has told us about himself in and through this book and if you do not think about God as this book describes, then you are worshipping a false god. So you should care why it is that this prophecy, which appears to refer to national, ethnic Israel should be read as referring to the church and not Israel.

Others of you believe that you ought to be able to read the Bible and understand it without having to think about it. You feel that anytime a pastor or some other "qualified" expert is needed to understand a passage of the Bible, then that explanation must be wrong because the Bible has to be simple to understand. I cannot tell you how much error there is in the church of Jesus because of this erroneous presupposition. Yes, the Bible is clear in its basic message about God as the creator and sustainer of all things, of human sin and God's just hatred of humans due to sin and of God's determination to save sinners through Christ. Yes you can become a Christian without knowing all the details of the biblical story. However you cannot be confident you are a Christian and you cannot be a very good Christian with small Bible knowledge. The message of the Bible is not simple because God is not a simple God. Just like you cannot know a human person after one conversation but it takes years of conversations and observations to know another human, so it takes years of exposure to God's talk in the Bible to know him well. So you should care why it is right to say that these words from Balaam are about the church of Jesus and not about national, ethnic Israel.

There are lots of Christians who would accuse me of not reading the Bible literally when I say these words are about the church and not about Israel. I would argue that the only way to read the OT literally, is to read it the way the NT authors, following Jesus, read it. They understood that Jesus is Israel; that national, ethnic Israel in the OT is a type of Christ and points to Christ. Thus all who are united to Christ by faith, whether Jew or Gentile are the true people of God because Jesus is God's firstborn son, Israel. One example will have to suffice for now. In Matthew 2 Joseph and Mary took the baby Jesus and fled to Egypt in order to escape the

murderous plot of King Herod to kill Jesus. After 2 years of living in Egypt the holy family returned to the land of Palestine from Egypt. In Matthew 2:15 the author tells us, "This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'" Matthew is quoting Hosea 11:1 in which Hosea is talking about the exodus of Israel from Egypt. How can Matthew say that Joseph and Mary returning with 4 year old Jesus from Egypt is the fulfillment of that prophetic word? It is because Jesus is Israel. All that happened to Israel is a foreshadowing of the sufferings of Christ and the glory that follows. The true people of God are those who are part of Jesus by the Spirit, through faith. Thus Balaam here is describing God's blessing upon his church.

Notice that he describes the church with the poetic language of the natural world. The church is like a stream flowing down a mountain valley, like a fruitful garden along a river, like trees planted by God along rivers and lakes. Thus the fruitfulness and permanence and security of the church are illustrated by these similes. The multiplication of the church is described poetically in v. 7 as irrigating water spreading abroad from the buckets of the church, as his seed flowing with that water. Then the protection of the church is described by the reference to a king arising out of Israel who will defeat Agag, the king of the Amalekites and whose kingdom will be exalted. As God brought Israel out of Egypt by fighting for him, so he will continue to fight with the power of the wild ox so that the church will overcome all its adversaries, like the lion. All those who bless the church will be blessed and all those who curse the church will be cursed.

This concept of God's blessing being upon a group of people and only upon individuals as they are associated with that group is hard for us citizens of the US to grasp. That last line is particularly difficult for us. God blesses those who bless the church and he curses those who curse the church. This is taken right from the original promise that God made to Abraham back in Genesis 12 and which has been repeated throughout the history of Israel. Jesus repeats this basic concept in relation to himself and to the church. In Matthew 10:32-33 he says, "So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven." Thus those who bless Jesus will be blessed and those who curse him will be cursed. Then a few verses later he says of his disciples, those related to him by faith (vv.40-42), "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me... And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward." Thus those who bless Christians will be blessed. In Matthew 16 Jesus says that he is building his church. If you ask, where is Jesus acting and working in this world, the answer is simple, in and through local churches as the embodiment of his universal church. How you treat the church is how you treat Jesus which point he makes crystal clear in Matthew 25. Jesus declares there that however you treated one of the least of his brothers, that is, Christians, is how you have treated him. Those who treat the church well will be treated well by Jesus at the judgment and those who did not treat the church well will not be treated well by Jesus at the judgment.

God has a plan he is working out and that plan is to bless the church by multiplying, prospering and protecting it. Thus, if you want to be confident that your plans will come to fruition, then make plans to bless the church. Do not act like a consumer looking for the best deal in town. Love the church of which you are a part and seek to promote its welfare and that of the people in it. Pray for and support the leadership of the church. Do not grumble and complain about what is or is not happening in the church. Speak well of it and work to add to it by evangelism and seek to build it by pursuing relationships with those in the church for the purpose of encouraging them to love Jesus and do good to others for his sake. Be a fellow-worker with God in promoting the welfare and multiplication of your local church.

### **III. Send his king to establish God's kingdom and destroy his enemies (vv. 17-24)**

After the two evil men express their frustration at not getting what they want the HS puts Balaam into another trance and tells Balak what Israel "will do to his people in the latter days (v.14)." There are several things to note about this last oracle. First, that phrase translated "in the latter days" is usually translated in the OT "in the last days" and is a phrase that most often refers to the end of this world, the day when Messiah comes. Second, as you can see in vv. 18-23 the prophecy does not simply describe what Israel will do to Moab but what God will do to all the nations of the world. Third, while he says this is about what Israel does, yet it is about what

the “star” and the “scepter” that come from Israel will do and it is about what God is going to do. In fact it is often difficult to distinguish who is doing what in this passage.

First, the HS enables Balaam to see the arrival of a “star”, a “scepter” who comes out of Jacob, out of Israel at some point in the distant future. He will shatter Moab’s head and break down all the sons of Seth. In Revelation 22:16 Jesus says, “I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” Jesus’ self identification is rooted in OT statements about the Messiah. That he is the “root of Jesse” and the “descendant of David” is referenced on numerous occasions in the OT. However, the only place the Messiah is referred to as a star in the OT is in this word from the HS inspired sorcerer, Balaam. In Psalm 110, which is the most quoted OT chapter in the NT and thus clearly describing Jesus as the Messiah we are told, “The LORD sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies!” Thus the scepter which comes from Israel to which Balaam refers is Jesus, the Messiah. In v. 19 we are told that this one will exercise dominion. Listen to this description of what God the Father did for Jesus in Ephesians 1:20-23, “... when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” It is the resurrected and ascended Lord Jesus Christ to whom Balaam is referring.

In vv. 17-24 a whole list of the enemy nations of Israel will be destroyed by God through this king: Moab, Edom, the Amalekites, the Kenites, Assyria, Eber and then this mysterious group sailing ships from Kittim. The enemy nations of God’s people are all slated for destruction while God’s kingdom is established as the only kingdom upon the earth. This same description is taken up in the NT, only now it is clearly shown that Jesus is the one who establishes God’s kingdom and destroys all the enemy nations. As in Revelation 11:15, “Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.’” And again in Revelation 19:11-15, “Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.”

In view of this reality every human being should be asking the question the HS asks through Balaam in v. 23, “Alas, who shall live when God does all this?” Who indeed shall be able to safely pass through the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty? There is only one answer to that question: Only those who have turned from sin, from living life as if you are in control and able to make God accept you and have trusted in Jesus alone to save you by his life, death and resurrection. Balak and Balaam went about their lives as if none of the prophecies which God spoke through Balaam were true. They continued on their path to curse and oppose Israel and both of them, as we will see later in Numbers, were killed. Thus came true in their lives what God said through Balaam, God curses those who curse his church because in cursing the church you are cursing Jesus. You who are listening to me this day have heard these same words of promise and warning. What will you do? God promises that all who come to Christ in faith will be welcomed into God’s forever family through him. So come now to Christ. Live your life now as if God is working out all his plans for the future. Live free from fear and pride by submitting your life to Christ and following him. But be warned that if you do not turn from sin to Christ you will be destroyed by God’s King, Jesus, as you will remain a member of the enemy nations of God which are slated for destruction.

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