

BALAAM THE PROPHET
WHO SOLD HIS SOUL

Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!

(Num. 23:10)

Balaam also the son of Beor they slew with the sword. (Num. 31:8)

Balaam remains one of the most enigmatic men mentioned in the Bible. He was a confused, bewildering conundrum, a prophet who never obtained what he most desired, and seldom said what he wanted to say. If he lived today he might have been an expert at riding a bicycle backward! He was always looking at things that were receding. His dreams never came true. He chased rainbows.

There were occasions when he resembled a puppet on a string. His lips moved but the words were not his own. The message was spoken by the Lord, who held the strings that governed movements. He knew what was pleasing to God, but refused to abandon his own desires. Like a moth returning to a dangerous flame, Balaam went back repeatedly to something that proved to be fatal. Trying to become wealthy he went bankrupt. He yearned to become a man of distinction and enjoyed being with kings; alas, he was buried with them. He thought he had found a gold mine; however, it was "fools' gold." He died a miserable pauper who had been humiliated by his own donkey!

A Man Tempted ... Danger

The actions of the ancient magician or whatever he was, were confusing and difficult to understand. Maybe the writers of the New Testament possessed additional information, for they denounced Balaam as a schemer, a miser, and an enemy of righteousness (see 2 Peter 2:15-16 and Rev. 2:14). Peter did not hesitate to mention the "madness" of Balaam.

Pethor was a city on the west bank of the Upper Euphrates River. It

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was an important center much desired by the kings who attacked it. Balaam resided there; his achievements had gained for him widespread popularity. He was probably a wizard who professed to be a spokesman for Jehovah, but he was not a devout believer in God. His income was derived from divination, and it was significant that when Balak, the king of the Moabites, solicited aid, the rewards of divination were offered to the hesitant prophet. John Bunyan would have called him "Mr. Two Face"!

When the triumphant Hebrews were approaching, the ruler of Moab, fearing an invasion, sought an alliance with the king of Midian and together they decided to employ the notorious Balaam. If he would curse the strangers from Egypt, they would make him a wealthy man: "And the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the rewards of divination in their hand; and they came unto Balaam, and spake unto him the words of Balak" (Num. 22:7, emphasis mine). That was the beginning of a prolonged enticement when the diviner had difficulty refusing their request. When God refused to curse Israel, the diviner delivered that message to his visitors, but the desire to obtain the offered rewards increased enormously. When the Lord tested him, the man seized the opportunity to accompany the messenger, and the Lord became displeased for Balaam was ready to sell his soul.

A Man Tested... Decision

The account of how the Angel of the Lord delayed the journey of

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Balaam makes exciting reading. The donkey, who saw God's messenger, refused to proceed, and as a consequence received undeserved punishment. "Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face" (Num. 22:31).

It is difficult to understand all the reasons why God permitted the prophet to meet the kings of Moab and Midian. The Lord insisted Balaam would speak only the words given to him and he obeyed that command. Nevertheless, he built altars upon which he offered bullocks and rams (see Num. 23:4). All this was done in the pretense of seeking something already received; it was fraudulent. He had been engaged to curse Israel, but was determined to return to Pethor well recompensed for his efforts. At first glance it appeared his movements and decisions were justified, but in the light of other Scriptures we are compelled to believe he was an avaricious scoundrel. When he realized the Lord

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would never permit his cursing Israel, the despicable man devised ways by which the Hebrews would bring disaster upon themselves.

A Man Troubled ... Defiled

There comes a moment in the life of every person when making a decision is unavoidable. Balaam knew what God desired, but persisted in seeking monetary remuneration. His deeds and fate should be a warning to all people. Jesus said, "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? (Matt. 16:26). Apparently, there are various reasons why people enter the Christian ministry. They accept it as a career in which they help people and that is commendable. I once shocked a woman who was anxious to become a missionary. I urged her to resist the inclination to run for her life! If after six months she discovered she could not escape, that her burden remained, then she would know God was calling her to serve Him. Unless the Lord places a man in a pulpit he should never be there! Balaam's profession assured him of an income, but the expenses of his mission were too costly.

Thereafter, the prophet from Pethor did things that were inexcusable. Peter said the man "loved the wages of unrighteousness" (2 Peter 2:15). When the Lord sent a letter to the church at Pergamos, He said, "But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication" (Rev. 2:14). When Balaam decided he would not be permitted to curse the children of Israel, he devised another scheme and said to Balak, Instead of fighting against Israel, flirt with them.

He advised the daughters of Moab to fraternize with the young men of Israel, and this was a violation of God's commandments. The lust of the males was quickly aroused and intermarriage destroyed the morality of the tribes. Furthermore, the people who grumbled about their food supplies were encouraged to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. The prophet smiled; he had injected poison into the veins of the Hebrews, and the effect would please his heathen employers. Balaam was a self-made genius, another Solomon whose wisdom exceeded anything known among his friends.

His wealth provided things previously unobtainable. The man might have purchased new apparel, renovated or replaced his home by the river, and with the aid of powerful friends the prophet could have become an elder in the community. Money can buy many things, but

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cannot rid the conscience of guilt. Did this wretched fellow lie awake

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at night wondering why God had ceased to communicate with him'? Did the divination business decline as customers became aware of his excessive greed?

A Man Terrified ... Dying

It is hard to understand how a man could know so much, yet sink so low. During the period when God spoke to him, Balaam recognized the greatness of Jacob and said, "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!" (Num. 23:10). Unfortunately, his desires were never granted. The poor man was horrified when he saw his executioners approaching. When men fight against God they lose the battle. That dubious prophet might have enjoyed years of fellowship among the people of God. He could have earned an immortal place with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and others who emulated their example. Alas, his name was covered with shame, and blood stains were on the floor of his house by the river. Dr. H. Bonner wrote a hymn that expressed that men are only remembered by what they have done. Unfortunately, there was little in the life and ministry of Balaam that was worth remembering. He was a man who sacrificed the happiness of other people on his altar of greed. His most valuable asset was a donkey, which had more brains than its master!

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