

Out with the Old, in with the New: The Faithfulness of God to His Promises

Numbers 21:1-25:18

To help us in our approach to this text, I want us to look first at the charactersⁱ and then draw some conclusions by way of application.

Israel

First, let's consider Israel. The exodus generation of Israelites simply failed in trusting God. No matter how many times God provided, delivered, or chastised, they respond in unbelief. The straw that broke the camel's back was the majority report of the spies leading to the exodus generation's refusal to possess the land of Canaan.ⁱⁱ Camped on the border at Kadesh, the land was there for the taking. They failed because of unbelief (14:11).

God sentenced them to die in the wilderness after 40 years of wandering (14:34). Numbers 20-25 transition us to the end of the 40 years. It is time for the new generation to move out in preparation to possess Canaan. Many of the exodus generation have died. By the time we finish with chapter 25, all of them will have died but not before a final, idolatrous rebellion showing their persistent unbelief (ch 25).

Two things must happen on the journey to the new staging area from which to launch the conquest: the new generation must learn to walk by faith and the exodus generation must die out. The new generation will be given opportunities to believe, and the old generation will respond to those same opportunities with unbelief.

Opportunities to Believe

Along the way, they will be attacked first by the Canaanite king of Arad. These are the same people who defeated Israel 40 years earlier at Hormah after the spy debacle (21:1-3; cf 14:39-45). Where their fathers failed by acting in unbelief, the new generation acted in faith and devoted the Canaanites to destruction.

As they got closer to the Transjordan staging area in the Plains of Moab, they were attacked again but this time by the Amorite King Sihon (21:21-26) and Og the king of Bashan (21:31-35). Israel defeated them and possessed their land (Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh will take it as a possession). The new generation was given an opportunity to believe that gave them a foretaste of possessing Canaan.

The episode of the fiery serpents will give them an opportunity exercise personal faith and further thin out the old unbelieving generation (21:4-9). The new generation had parents who had experienced the LORD's faithfulness repeatedly and responded with ingratitude and unbelief. The new generation had to realize the necessity of personal faith. It's not enough simply to be a part of the Israelite nation, you must also walk with God in faith.

The demise of the exodus generation

The curious scene of idolatry in chapter 25 finished off the exodus generation but highlighted the faithfulness of new generation as Phinehas the priest rises to make atonement for the people and thus secures the high priesthood for his line (25:7-9, 10-13). This is Israel.ⁱⁱⁱ

Balak

Balak is the pagan king of Moab. Ammon (cf. 21:24) and Moab were the sons of Lot, Abraham's nephew (the son of Abraham's brother). This family connection is not lost on Balak. In fact, God had commanded Moses not to attack Ammon or Moab for the sake of Lot (cf. Deut. 2:9,19). Balak, however, did not share the sense of family loyalty.

What set him off was Israel's defeat of the Amorites (22:2). The Amorites had defeated the former king of Moab (cf 21:26). For that reason, Moab figured he could not beat Israel in head to head battle. In alliance with Midian, he sent a delegation to Balaam, a renowned pagan seer for hire, to employ his services to come and curse Israel. Balak hoped by employing unconventional warfare he might gain the advantage and defeat Israel (22:6a).

He apparently did not know God's promise to bless those who bless Abraham curse those who cursed him (cf Gen 12:2-3). His message to Balaam was capped by these words: *For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse in cursed* (22:6b). Balak should have blessed Israel. But in cursing them, he brought the curse of God upon himself.

Balak is a pagan and he thinks of God like a pagan. His thoughts of God are too human. He thought of God as one like himself: whimsical, prone to fits, manipulable, and mutable (cf. 23:27b).

3 times in different locations he built 7 altars, and with Balaam, offered a bull and a ram on each. When Balaam could not curse Israel from Bamoth-baal (22:41),

Balak thought the reason was that only a fraction of the people could be seen from that vantage point, so moving to Pisgah may do the trick (23:13). When that did not work, he moved Balaam to Baal-peor to yet another vantage point (23:28). When that did not produce a curse on Israel, Balak became angry and *struck his hands together* (24:10) and read it off to Balaam: *I called you to curse my enemies and you have blessed them 3 times* (24:10). He refused to pay Balaam (24:11).

Balaam

What are we to think of Balaam? Was he good or bad? A true prophet or shaman? The biblical writers rarely tell us outright if their characters are good or bad. They give hints, however, in the way they construct their stories. We know from other references that Balaam was a bad man (cf. Numbers 31:8b,16; Deut 23:4-5; 2Pet 2:15; Jude 11; Rev 2:14).

How does this story write Balaam? He is a seer for hire of considerable reputation. Whomever he blesses is blessed, and whomever he curses is cursed (22:6). Balak sent a delegation to hire Balaam to come and curse a people described as those who have come out of Egypt and cover the earth (22:11). Balaam consulted God about the job. God said, *You shall not go and you shall not curse them for they are blessed* (22:12). Balak sent a second more impressive delegation to hire Balaam. Again, he consulted God, and God said, *Go with them, but only do what I tell you* (22:20b).

The next morning Balaam set out on his donkey, but God's anger was kindled against him because he went (22:22). God told him to go and then was angry because he went?^{iv} This is a pattern that recurs in Scripture. For example, God told Moses to go to Egypt and get his people. As Moses was going the LORD sought to kill him (cf. Ex. 4:24). There was something in Moses that God had to adjust for him to be usable. The same is true for Balaam. The Scripture tells us what that is in God's word to Balaam: *Go with the men but speak only the word that I tell you* (22:35). Balaam wanted his fee and was trying to figure out a way to get it. The one thing he could not do was curse Israel.

This point is driven home to Balaam in the most comical way. An angel blocked his way 3 times. Each time the donkey saw the angel and tried to avoid it. 3 times Balaam beat his donkey (22:23,25,27). Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth and what ensued was a conversation between Balaam and his donkey that Balaam does not think is odd at all (22:22-30). More interesting than the donkey

talking is that Balaam is a professional, internationally renowned seer but is less discerning than his donkey.

Now we are getting to how this text writes Balaam. The donkey points to Balaam's role in the story.^v God has put a bit in Balaam's mouth. As God put words in the Donkey's mouth, he also put words in Balaam's mouth (23:5,16). He can only say what God tells him (22:20, 35; 23:12,26; 24:13). As Balaam drives his donkey three times until the angel stops him, so Balak pushes Balaam to curse Israel three times until it is clear that God is standing in the way. To be prefigured by a donkey, does not put one in a favorable light. The parallelism between Balaam and the donkey suggests that the ability to declare God's word is not necessarily a sign of holiness.

The idolatry at Peor (ch 25) is laid at the feet of Balaam. Apparently, when Balaam parted ways with Balak (cf. 24:25), he went to spend time with the Midianites. It was on his advice that women of Midian and Moab introduced ritual prostitution in the camp of Israel. His sinister idea may have been something like, *I can't curse those whom God has blessed, but if you entice them to sin, God will curse them* (Num. 31:16).

God

And then there is God. We could say much about God. The text emphasizes certain truths about God. First, the text is bookended by the *anger* of God. In fact, most of the main characters in the story are angry. God told Balaam to go with the delegation, and then his anger was kindled because Balaam went (cf. 21:20 and 22). God's anger is also kindled against Israel because of the idolatry at Baal-peor (25:5). Between these two references to God's anger is the anger of Balaam and Balak. The same language is used: Balaam's anger was kindled at his donkey (21:27), and Balak's anger was kindled at Balaam (24:10).

What are we to learn from this? Two things: anger does not represent a change in God. God is not wishy-washy in telling Balaam to go and then being angry because he went. This represents no change in God. Balaam did not see it as a change in God. In his second oracle, Balaam said to Balak, *God is not a man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it* (23:19)? God is angry with the wicked everyday (cf. Ps 7:11). God's anger with the wicked flows out of his justice.

As second thing we can learn is God accomplishes his purpose in his anger, but the anger of man is futile. God in his anger would keep Balaam from cursing his people, and He would also carry out his death sentence on the exodus generation. Balaam and Balak's anger was nothing more than frustration at their inability to accomplish their will. The contrast between God, who is immutable and always accomplishes his will, and the impotence of man is obvious.

A second point about God that is crucial to make at this point in the biblical storyline is that God is faithful to his promise. With the exodus generation dying out in the wilderness, the text wants to show that the purpose has not failed. The Balaam text reconnects us to the promise God made to Abraham. The language of cursing and blessing intentionally echoes^{vi} the Abrahamic covenant.

God said to Abraham,

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen. 12:2-3).

Hear some of the language of the covenant echoed in the words of this text:

Balak sent for Balaam saying, *For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed (22:6b)*. We hear that and say, *Not so fast, that is the prerogative of God.*

In his first oracle Balaam recognizes that blessing and cursing is the prerogative of God: *How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced (23:8)?*

In his second oracle, Balaam said, *He has blessed, and I cannot revoke it (23:20)*. Balak responds, *Do not curse them at all, and do not bless them at all (23:25)*.

In his third oracle, Balaam again said, *Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you (24:9b)*. Balak responds, *I called you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have blessed them these three times (24:10)*.

The Abrahamic covenant is always in the background, buoying the biblical storyline until we get to Christ.^{vii} The Abrahamic covenant is why Israel was delivered from Egyptian bondage (Ex. 2:24). Here, in the Balaam narrative, it roars to the surface in a surprising way and controls the narrative. The Balaam text

shouts in the transition from the exodus generation to the new generation that the promise of God stands. With a rebellious generation dying in the wilderness, we might ask, *Has the promise of God failed?* The text shouts back, *NO*.

Here, then, are the characters in the story: Israel, Balak, Balaam, and God. What are some conclusions we can draw from the story by way of application?

1. God requires faith from his people

The issue of faith is addressed in a couple ways in chapter 21. Israel, especially the new generation, was given the opportunity to trust God. Their fathers had miserably failed at trusting God (14:11; even Moses 20:12).

To journey with God requires faith. God is not so much interested in your ability (he is not lacking in ability), but he is interested in your trusting.

On the journey to the Transjordan Plains of Moab, God gave Israel the opportunity to believe through being attacked by 3 kings. Somehow, we have this idea that if we set out to follow God, life will be easy-peasy. You will not get very far down the road with God before you will be attacked. What makes this even harder is it feels like God is the one attacking you. The way of faith will become difficult. The bottom will fall out. Things will not go as planned. The journey will be harder than you thought it would be.

What is God doing? God is giving you the opportunity to trust him. He is making adjustments in your life to make you usable. He is getting you out of the way. He is helping you get over yourself. His work, his Kingdom, His plan does not depend on us, but we depend on him. He can't use us until this is worked out.

The fiery serpents were also an opportunity to believe. The difference between the two is Israel fought their attackers together, but to look on the bronze serpent and live required personal faith.

God is interested in relating to you personally. Too often we are like the Israelites when they asked Moses to ask God *to take away to the serpents from us* (21:7b). We want the LORD to just take away our problems, so we do not have to suffer, experience discomfort, or change.

God requires personal faith. We know the *look and live* of Numbers 21 is faith because Jesus said it was. In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus said: *As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life* (Jn 3:14).

God in the wilderness and today requires faith. The faith of your church and the faith of your family will not save you, as wonderful as those things are. You must place your faith in Christ, trusting in him alone to save you. He calls you to personally place your faith, hope, trust in him alone and then, to learn to walk with him in faith daily.

2. God has blessed you with irrevocable blessing.

I don't think the exodus generation ever felt blessed. They started complaining in Exodus 15 and complained all the way to the end. They would not have had to complain to get food and water from God.

It is telling that they were in the valley below living out the promised blessings that God made to Abraham—descendants, land, and blessing—and constantly felt that God was holding out on them.

They had no idea that God was on the mountains surrounding them forbidding a pagan seer from cursing them. He went so far as to speak through a donkey and through a shaman for hire to show the reality of his irrevocable blessing on his people.

If you are in Christ, God has blessed you irrevocably. Please, please stop thinking that you are not blessed. Spiritual depression is rampant. Too often we are reduced to an obsession with ourselves. We are not at peace with ourselves. We are reduced to surviving. We have nothing left in us to give, and we feel resentful because no one is serving us.

We are like the Israelites when they spoke against God and against Moses saying, *there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food* (21:5). We extend grace to no one and judge our church family harshly.

Realize that the evil one and all the powers of darkness are all around desiring nothing more than to curse us. But God has spoken irrevocable blessing over your life, and you are blessed. Stop thinking you are not blessed!

3. God has given you a future

After the third oracle and Balak's angry outburst and refusal to pay Balaam, Balaam gave Balak a bonus oracle. It is of the future (24:14b). It starts with the same words as Jacob's blessing on his sons in Genesis 49:1, only Balak and all nations who opposed God are crushed. It also takes up the Messianic theme Jacob took up regarding Judah (24:17).

God has a future for his people that comes through and only through Christ.

4. Don't open your life to the devil, run to Christ.

If the enemy cannot come through the front door, he will go through the back. Balaam could not curse Israel, so he suggested to the Midianites to send their daughters to entice the Israelites to participate in idolatrous, ritual prostitution. The old generation invited the devil into the camp. This was the demise of the exodus generation.

Phinehas was of the new generation and demonstrated faith in making atonement for the people.

Don't open your life to the devil. I feel like we are the family in the Israelite camp who son walked in with a ritual prostitute, facilitating a plague on the people of God, and we are at a loss as to what to do (25:6).

Abigail Shrier, in her book, *Irreversible Damage*, writes *Nearly every novel problem teenagers face traces itself back to 2007 and the introduction of Steve Job's iPhone. ... The statistical explosion of bullying, cutting, anorexia, depression, and the [sudden] rise of transgender identification is owed to ... relentless harassment supplied by a single smartphone.*^{viii}

When I was a kid if a bully wanted to pick on me or if people wanted to say mean things to me, they had to do it to my face. We live in a generation now where parents are afraid of their children: afraid not to give them a phone, afraid to look at it after they give it to them, and afraid to take it away from them when they see it doing harm to them. People are glued to their phones like a generation of phone worshipers. We have more affection for our phones than we have for God.

What is the goal of technology, the internet and social media? Is it for your good? I sound like my Dad 60 years ago preaching against the TV. The free love hippies of the 60's look like parochial schoolboys now. Today the sexual revolution has reached such a fever that porn is a pandemic, sexual identity is everything, and we are watching kids being washing away while they are telling us, *you are invading my privacy*.

What will I liken this generation to: We are like the Israelite who has been bitten by a fiery serpent. When we hear the message, *look and live*, we say, *No, I think I'll keep my snake!*

Don't open your life to the devil but run to Christ. If you have sinned run to Christ. It is better to go through life without a phone than to be cast into hell with your phone.

We come now to the table. There is a better Priest than Phinehas who has made atonement for our life.

ⁱ I'm indebted to Dennis Olson for the idea of character sketches. (See Dennis Olson, *Interpretation*, 140-141.

ⁱⁱ The LORD also called this *despising* him. This action was a rejection of God's project of redemption. The implications of it were cosmic—the divine purpose fails.

ⁱⁱⁱ The picture in chapters 22-24 is of Israel blissfully unaware of the spiritual battle for their future taking place on the mountains around them. Balak hired Balaam to curse Israel so that he might defeat them in battle (22:6). Three times they tried to curse Israel and could not: first from Bamoth-baal (22:41), the High Places of Baal, then from the top of Pisgah (23:14), and last from Baal-Peor (23:28). The scene is Israel blissfully by faith camped on the border of Canaan resting in the blessing of God.

^{iv} God was angry with Balaam (22:22); Balaam was angry with the donkey (22:27); and Balak was angry with Balaam (24:10); the LORD anger was kindled against Israel (25:3).

^v Wenham helped me see this analogy in the story that reveals the true character of Balaam (Wenham, TOTC, 188-189. One other point of similarity in the donkey and Balaam is in the idea of seeing. The donkey saw the angel. In 22:31 the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam and he saw the angel. Then in Balaam's 3rd and 4th oracle with repeated words, Balaam said, the oracle of the man whose eye is opened...who see the vision of the Almighty, falling down with his eyes uncovered (24:3-4, 16-17).

^{vi} There are other echoes of the Abrahamic covenant as well; 23:10 echoes Gen 15:5; 24:7 echoes Gen 17:5-8; Balaam introduces his 4th oracle with the exact words Jacob used to introduce his blessing on his sons (Gen 49:1; cf. Num. 24:14); the language of Balaam's 2nd and 3rd oracles echo Jacobs's blessing on Judah (Num 23:24; 24:14; cf. Gen 49:9, 10) leading to Balaam's 4th oracle and the words of the oracle in 24:17 echo Jacob's blessing (cf. Gen 49:10).

^{vii} The importance of that covenant in biblical theology should not be overlooked and cannot be over emphasized. That covenant, not the Sinai/Mosaic covenant, drives the narrative of the OT and takes us all the way to the New Covenant to find fulfillment (Rom 4:1-25; Gal. 3:1-9,15-29; 4:21-31).

^{viii} Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*, 212.