

# The “Madness”<sup>1</sup> of the Prophet<sup>2</sup>



## SABBATH—NOVEMBER 28

**READ FOR THIS WEEK’S LESSON:** Numbers 22–24; Deuteronomy 1:30; Deuteronomy 20:4; Matthew 15:14; 1 Corinthians 2:14; 2 Peter 2:14–16; Revelation 3:17.

**MEMORY VERSE:** “Love for money causes all kinds of evil. Some people want to get rich. They have wandered away from the faith. They have wounded themselves with many sorrows” (1 Timothy 6:10, NIV).

**THE STORY OF BALAAM IS WELL-KNOWN.** It often is used to make jokes, such as, “Well, if God could talk through Balaam’s donkey, then He could talk through so-and-so.”

But, in one way, there is nothing really funny about this story. The story can be read on different levels. But the main point is that Balaam’s experience with the Lord is one more example of how sin can destroy us if we do not overcome it with God’s help.

Balaam is used as an example in the New Testament three times (2 Peter 2:15, 16; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14). Not one of them is positive. In fact, Balaam is a symbol of sin.

Peter talks about the “madness” of Balaam. But it was not the “madness” of a crazy person. Instead, it was the madness of someone (Balaam) who was so greedy for money that he was ready to do what Balak, king of Moab, asked, no matter how wrong it was.

If someone like Balaam, a prophet, could be so “mad,” how much “madder” would we be to do almost the same, even after learning about Balaam’s sorry example?

1. madness—craziness.

2. prophet—a man or woman who is a spokesperson for God. God gives a prophet special messages to give to His people. A prophet also speaks to God on behalf of His people. God also may give prophets warnings about what will happen in the future.

**SUNDAY—NOVEMBER 29****A FEARFUL AND FOOLISH KING  
(Numbers 22:1–6)**

Put yourself for a moment in the place of Balak, king of Moab. Here was this great crowd of people (Israel) who had come out of the powerful nation of Egypt. The people of Israel lived, but it was only by miracles<sup>3</sup> (what else?), in the desert for 40 years. And now they were camped “in the plains of Moab” (Numbers 22:1, KJV), not far from Balak’s kingdom.

The nation (Israel) had not made any threats against Balak. It was not planning to take over his kingdom. But Balak still was nervous. After all, think about what Israel had just done to King Og of Bashan and to King Sihon of the Amorites—whose nation had already beaten Moab in war (read Numbers 21:26). On top of that, Israel also had beaten the Canaanites (verses 1–3). No wonder Balak was nervous.

**What does Numbers 22:1–6 tell us about the Israelites that made the king fearful?**

**If Israel were truly a threat, what should Balak really have been afraid of? Read Genesis 48:21; Exodus 15:1; Deuteronomy 1:30; Deuteronomy 20:4.**

Balak thought he was facing an enemy that could not be beaten. So

it was rather odd that he wanted help from a prophet of the God of the very people he wanted to curse and defeat! We do not know if Balak understood what he was doing. But his plans were doomed from the start. We cannot help wondering why Balak did not get one of his own local “holy” men to pray to the Moabite gods to defend them against Israel. Instead, Balak called upon a prophet of the true God to help him. Perhaps Numbers 22:6 explains best why Balak did what he did. He said to Balaam, “‘Put a curse on those people. They are too powerful for me. Maybe I’ll [I will] be able to win the battle over them. Maybe I’ll [I will] be able to drive them out of the country. I know that those you bless will be blessed. And I know that those you put a curse on will be cursed.’ ” (NirV).

**Ask yourself how much you really depend upon God. And how much you trust in yourself, your money, your job, your talents, whatever. How can you learn to get your eyes off these things and on the Lord? Why is that naturally hard to do? Read 1 Corinthians 2:14.**

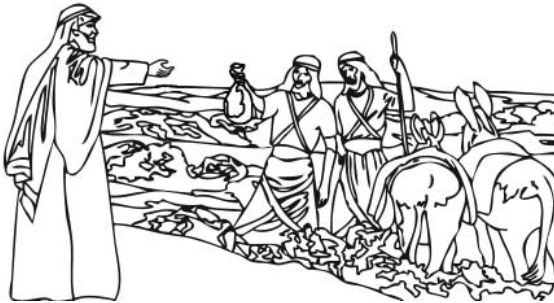
**MONDAY—NOVEMBER 30****BALAAM (Numbers 22:7–21)**

Who was this Balaam?

“Balaam was once a good man and a prophet of God. But he had backslidden. And his desire for money

3. miracles—extraordinary (amazing; great) events believed to be signs of the power of God. Examples of miracles are Peter’s walking on water and Jesus’ raising Lazarus from the dead.

overcame him. But he still claimed to be a servant of God. He knew about the great work God had done for Israel. When Balak’s messengers announced why they had come, Balaam knew very well that he should not take money from Balak. He knew he should send the messengers back to their king. But he played with temptation.”<sup>4</sup>—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*,<sup>5</sup> page 439.



**Balaam knew he should refuse to take the king’s money.**

**According to Numbers 22:7–21, it seems, at first, that Balaam is faithful to the Lord. But, if you read carefully, what hints can you find of his playing with temptation?**

Balaam encouraged the king’s messengers to stay with him that night. He said he would give no firm answer until he had asked for the Lord’s advice. Balaam must have realized that his curses would not hurt Israel. This is because Balaam knew the Lord. He really did not need to ask the Lord. Who knows?

4. temptation—anything that can turn us away from God and that tries to get us to do, think, feel, or say what is wrong.

5. *Patriarchs and Prophets*—patriarchs were leaders of God’s people in early Bible times, such as Abraham and Isaac, or other leaders of Israel, such as Moses; prophets are men or women who are given messages by God to give to His people.

6. tempted—being presented with an opportunity (chance) to do wrong.

Maybe Balaam hoped there would be another answer. In any case, Balaam had the messengers stay overnight. Instead, he should have sent them back right away. By letting them stay, Balaam opened himself up to temptation. After all, the men had come with “the money they knew Balaam would ask for” (Numbers 22:7, NIV).

Notice what happens when the messengers promised Balaam even more money. God had said that “ ‘These men have come to get you. So go with them. But do only what I tell you to do’ ” (Numbers 22:20, NIV). So, Balaam rose early in the morning. He left before the leaders of Israel could stop him. Balaam saddled his donkey. He rode off at once with men sent by the king of Moab. Balaam pretended to be faithful to God. But he was really eager to get his hands on all the money offered to him.

**What did Peter think in 2 Peter 2:14–16 of the actions of Balaam? What warning is there for any of us about being greedy and tempted?<sup>6</sup> Why is it so easy to make excuses for our sin so that it does not seem sinful?**

## TUESDAY—DECEMBER 1

### UNUSUAL EXPERIENCE (Numbers 22:22–34)

Balaam was set in his desire. He

wanted to get the rewards the king offered him. So he set out with the men toward Moab. Balaam pretended to be very faithful to the Lord. He even might have fooled himself. But the Lord knew what was going on in Balaam’s heart. The Lord did something about it.

**Read Numbers 22:22–34 and answer the following questions:**

- **What meaningful message might there be in the fact that a donkey who normally could not speak was able to see the angel of the Lord? Yet Balaam, who claimed to be a true prophet of God, could not? Read Zephaniah 1:17; Matthew 15:14; Revelation 3:17.**
- **Read Balaam’s first answer to the donkey after it spoke to him. Think about what was happening. What does Balaam’s foolish answer show about what was truly in his heart? What does it show about his desire for wealth? After all, what would most people do if an animal started speaking to them?**
- **How does this story show God’s grace,<sup>7</sup> even to Balaam, who was not faithful to Him?**

A lot has been written over a long period of time about this story. It is one of the stranger stories in the Bible. Different Bible experts come away with different meanings. But one point seems clear: Balaam was a man who had a special connection with the



**The Lord knew what was in Balaam’s heart.**

Lord. But the Lord still was speaking with Balaam very closely. And even with this connection, Balaam still was stubborn about doing what he wanted to do.

In what ways, even in hidden ways, do you find yourself fighting against the Lord? For example, do you find yourself doing something that you know God does not want you to do? How can you overcome this dangerous attitude (thought or feeling)?

### **WEDNESDAY—DECEMBER 2**

#### **“THE DEATH OF THE RIGHTEOUS (HOLY; PURE)” (Numbers 23:5–10)**

After the event with the donkey, Balaam came to Balak. Balak brought Balaam to “the high places of Baal” (Numbers 22:41). How interesting! Near Eastern pagans<sup>8</sup> built their temples of worship on the tops of mountains so that they could be closer

7. grace—God’s gift of forgiveness and mercy (kindness) that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

8. pagans—idol worshipers.

to their “gods.” Balaam ordered the king to build at this place seven altars.<sup>9</sup> Then Balaam told the king to offer seven bullocks (male cows) and seven rams upon these altars.

**Read God’s words in Numbers 23:5–10, spoken through Balaam over the children of Israel. What powerful message and promise are found in them? What hope is offered to all of us in them too? Read also 1 Corinthians 15.**

“Balaam saw the people of Israel. They were supported by God’s arm as they entered the dark valley of the shadow of death. And Balaam saw them coming forth from their graves; they were crowned with glory,<sup>10</sup> honor, and eternal life.<sup>11</sup> He saw saved people living happy lives on the earth made new. Watching the scene, Balaam spoke, ‘Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the fourth part of Israel?’ He saw the crown of glory on every forehead. He saw the joy beaming from every face. He looked into the future to that endless, happy life. Balaam then spoke the prayer, ‘Let me die the death of the righteous. Let my last end be the same as these peoples!’ ”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, page 447.



God showed Balaam the future.

**What does it mean to “die the death of the righteous”? What is the only way we can die such a death according to Romans 3:20–24?**

God’s words, spoken over His chosen people of Israel, show His gospel<sup>12</sup> promise. It is a promise given to all of God’s people who have ever lived. It is the gift of Jesus. None of us is righteous. None of us is righteous enough to save ourselves from the grave. Only the righteousness (holy life) of Jesus can save us. And it is given to us by faith. Here, in the story of Balaam, God shows us the promise of salvation through Jesus.

**THURSDAY—DECEMBER 3**

**STAR AND SCEPTER<sup>13</sup>  
(Numbers 24:15–17)**

9. altars—structures that are raised off the ground, or special places, on which sacrifices (gifts) are made or incense (sweet-smelling perfume) is burned to a false god.

10. glory—great beauty, power, and royal perfection.

11. eternal life—forever, without beginning or end; lasting forever.

12. gospel—the good news that Jesus saves us from our sins; the good news about salvation.

13. scepter—a staff that a king holds out to people to show that he accepts them. A scepter shows a king’s authority (power) over his people.

Imagine the king’s surprise when Balaam began to bless Israel. The king was angry. But he still was not ready to give up. He took the prophet to another mountain peak. Balaam could see only a small part of Israel from there. The king built seven altars. Again he offered bullocks and rams. Balaam tried again to curse Israel (Numbers 24:1). But he could not. Instead, Balaam was under God’s power. He spoke another blessing over Israel. Balak tried to curse Israel a third time. He arranged for seven more altars and their sacrifices<sup>14</sup> on another peak. But Balaam knew it was useless. He could not ask God for permission to use magic on Israel. Instead, Balaam looked on Israel’s camp from this third place. Then he blessed the nation again (Numbers 23:27–30; Numbers 24:1–10). So Balak sent Balaam home in shame for failing to curse Israel.

**Read the parable (story) Balaam told in Numbers 24:15–17. How did this parable (story) become a prophecy?<sup>15</sup> And how was it fulfilled? Read also Genesis 49:10; Matthew 2:1, 2.**

“The three wise men of the East desired a clearer knowledge of the coming of the Messiah [the Chosen One]. They studied the Hebrew Bible. They read the prophecy of Balaam. . . . Balaam was at one time a prophet of God. But now he belonged to the magicians. By the Holy Spirit, Balaam had foretold the success of Israel. He also foretold the appearing of the

Messiah. . . . The prophecy of Balaam had announced, ‘There shall come a Star out of Jacob. And a Scepter shall rise out of Israel.’ . . . Could this strange star have been sent as a prophecy of the Promised One [Jesus]?’—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pages 59, 60.

Bible students long have believed these words to be a prophecy of the coming of the Messiah, the Savior, Jesus Christ. The scepter (power) and the star (light) both are perfect symbols<sup>16</sup> of Jesus. At the time of the prophecy itself, the Lord used local symbols. These symbols would have meaning to those who heard it then. But the promise behind the prophecy (Christ’s power and victory<sup>17</sup>) is given to the whole world. Jesus is the Light of the world. He is the rightful Owner of it. In the end, the whole world will see Him come in triumph. Read Isaiah 45:23; Romans 14:11; and Philipians 2:10.



“There shall come a Star out of Jacob.”

14. sacrifices—gifts and offerings.

15. prophecy—a special message from God, often an explanation of what will happen in the future.

16. symbols—objects, marks, signs, or persons that stand for, or mean the same thing as, other objects, ideas, or things.

17. victory—the act of winning the battle over, or winning the struggle against, something, such as sin.

The world has much evil and unfairness in it. But we have the promise that God will succeed and that His justice will win too. How does that promise help you deal with all the injustice around you?

#### FRIDAY—DECEMBER 4

**ADDITIONAL STUDY:** Read Ellen G. White, “Balaam,” pages 438–452, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; “The Beatitudes,”<sup>18</sup> pages 17–44; “The Spirituality<sup>19</sup> of the Law,” pages 45–58, in *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*.

“He who will abuse animals is both a coward and a tyrant.<sup>20</sup> Causing pain to people or animals shows the cruelty of Satan. Many do not think that their cruelty ever will be known. They think they are safe, because poor dumb animals cannot speak and complain about it. But if the eyes of these people could be opened, as were those of Balaam, they would see an angel of God. This angel stands as a witness. He testifies<sup>21</sup> against them in the heavenly courts above. A record of the wrong goes up to heaven. And a day is coming when judgment

[punishment] will be given to those who abuse God’s creatures [people or animals].”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, page 443.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① What are some other lessons we can learn from the story of Balaam? What does it teach about God’s rulership? About our free will? About God’s watch-care? About our sinfulness?
- ② Think more about this idea of the “death of the righteous.” If you were to die today, would it be a “death of the righteous”? Defend your answer.
- ③ Money is such an evil influence<sup>22</sup> in all areas of life, including our religious life. How can we, as Christians, protect ourselves, our faith, and our church from the evil influence of money?
- ④ Second Peter 2:15, 16; Jude 11; and Revelation 2:14 are the only New Testament verses about Balaam. What can we learn from them that can help us better understand where Balaam went wrong?

18. Beatitudes—the ten rules for happy Christian living listed by Jesus in Matthew 5:2–12.

19. spirituality—new life given to us by God to lead Christ-centered lives; being born again.

20. tyrant—a cruel ruler.

21. testifies—to speak for or against something or someone, often in a court of law.

22. influence—the power to affect or change persons or things.