

The “Madness” of the Prophet



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Numbers 22–24, Deut. 1:30, 20:4, Matt. 15:14, 1 Cor. 2:14, 2 Pet. 2:14–16, Rev. 3:17.*

Memory Text: “For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Timothy 6:10).

The story of Balaam is well-known and often used to make jokes, such as, “Well, if God could talk through Balaam’s donkey, then He could talk through so-and-so.”

In one sense, however, there’s nothing really funny about this story. Though it can be read on various levels, Balaam’s encounter with the Lord can be seen as another example of how sin, if not overcome, if not wrestled with through the power of God, can lead us into paths of destruction.

Balaam is referred to in the New Testament three times (2 Pet. 2:15, 16; Jude 11; Rev. 2:14), and none of the references are very flattering. On the contrary, he’s a prototype, a symbol, of sin.

Peter talks about the “madness” of Balaam. Yet, it wasn’t the “madness” of the mentally deranged; rather, it was the madness of someone who was so swept up into covetousness that he was ready to do what Balak asked, and all for money, regardless of how wrong it was.

If someone like Balaam, a prophet, could be so “mad,” how much madder would we be to do something similar, especially with his example before us?

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 5.*

A Fearful and Deluded King

Try to put yourself in the position of Balak, king of Moab. Here was this massive horde that had come out of the great nation of Egypt and who had survived only by miracles (what else?) in the desert for four decades. And now they were camped “in the plains of Moab” (*Num. 22:1*), not far from his kingdom.

Even though the nation had not made any threats against them and wasn’t intending to invade, Balak, understandably, was nervous. After all, just look what they had done to King Og of Bashan and to King Sihon of the Amorites—whose nation already had defeated Moab (*see Num. 21:26*). Not to mention what they had done to the Canaanites (*vss. 1–3*), too. No wonder he was nervous.

Read Numbers 22:1–6. What was it about the Israelites that especially made the king fearful?

In reality, if Israel had been a threat, what should Balak really have been afraid of? *See Gen. 48:21, Exod. 15:1, Deut. 1:30, 20:4.*

It’s kind of ironic that Balak, facing what he believed to be an insurmountable foe, would seek out a prophet of the God of the very people he wanted cursed and defeated. Whether he realized what he was doing, we don’t know; but from our perspective, it’s obvious that Balak’s plans were doomed from the start. One only could wonder, too, why he didn’t get one of his own local *holy men* to petition the Moabite gods to defend them against Israel. Instead, he called upon a prophet of the true God. Perhaps the key to that is found in Numbers 22:6: “ ‘Curse this people for me, for they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed’ ” (*NKJV*).

Ask yourself how much you really seek to 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? *See 1 Cor. 2:14.*

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *1 Timothy 6:10*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Analyze the sad downfall of a prophet of God who was seduced by promises of riches to dishonor God.

Feel: Recognize the danger of dallying with temptation in any form.

Do: Flee temptation by focusing our attention on God's grace and goodness.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

I. Know: A Prophet's Downfall

A Balaam acknowledged that he could do and say only what God commanded, so how did he keep trying to accommodate Balak's desires to curse Israel? Because God had given Balaam permission of sorts to go to Balak, why did the angel stand in the way of the donkey? How did God show grace to Balaam?

B According to Revelation 2:14, how did Balaam eventually find a way to accommodate Balak's wishes to harm Israel?

II. Feel: An Awareness of the Danger of Dalliance

A How are we like Balaam, trying to dance a thin line of obedience to God and at the same time trying to accommodate our own desires?

B Balaam's unwilling blessings on Israel portray a beautiful picture of what were often a weak and rebellious people. What desires do these blessings awaken in your heart?

III. Do: Our Choice—To Be God's Lion or a Lion's Prey

A Though we share Israel's weaknesses to fall prey to temptation, what can we do to "die the death of the righteous" that Balaam prophesied? What should we do to avoid Balaam's downfall?

B How can we attain the blessings that Balaam foresaw belonging to the children of God?

▶ **Summary:** A once-faithful prophet lost his way through coveting a worldly king's reward.

Balaam

Who was this Balaam?

“Balaam was once a good man and a prophet of God; but he had apostatized, and had given himself up to covetousness; yet he still professed to be a servant of the Most High. He was not ignorant of God’s work in behalf of Israel; and when the messengers announced their errand, he well knew that it was his duty to refuse the rewards of Balak and to dismiss the ambassadors. But he ventured to dally with temptation.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 439.

Read Numbers 22:7–21. On the surface, it looks as if Balaam is standing firm for the Lord. However, if you read carefully, what hints can you find of his playing with temptation?

Balaam had urged the messengers to tarry with him that night, declaring that he would give no decided answer till he had asked counsel of the Lord. Balaam must have realized that his curses would not hurt Israel, for Balaam knew, or at least had known, the Lord. He really didn’t need to ask the Lord; perhaps He did so hoping there would be another answer. Either way, by having them linger when he should have dismissed them right away, he opened himself up to temptation. After all, the men had come with “the fees for divination” (*vs. 7, NRSV*).

Notice what happened at the second invitation, when they promised him even more. God had said that “if the men come to call” he may go, provided he speak only what God said (*vs. 20*). But in the early morning—before the princes could say anything—Balaam saddled his donkey and rode off at once with the ambassadors of Moab. In other words, despite all the pretense of faithfulness and his claims about not being able to be bought at any price, he was eager to get all the money that was offered to him.

Read 2 Peter 2:14–16. How did Peter view the actions of Balaam? What warning is there for us regarding covetousness and temptation? Why is it so easy to rationalize away our sin to the point that it doesn’t seem sinful?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: In this lesson, class members should learn how insidious greed really is and how to keep it from controlling their lives.

Just for Teachers: If work, study, family, and even church responsibilities consistently edge out all time for spiritual growth, it becomes all too easy for impulses and influences other than God to possess our lives and dictate our decisions. Ask the class to discuss God and greed in the context of time management.

This week, we learn that the story of Balaam—a seemingly comic tale of a talking donkey that balks at its belligerent master—is really about how unbridled covetousness can trample our better instincts. At first, we might be tempted to regard Balaam as more of a blockhead than a madman. Who, after all, would still try to curse God’s people after a donkey’s braying and a sword-wielding angel’s stern warning—not to mention that direct words from God—urged otherwise? But we soon learn Balaam’s consuming desire for reward eclipsed both his common sense and his commitment to God.

If God’s will isn’t guiding our lives, does greed hold the reins? If we’re not worshipping God, who or what are we kneeling before? How can we keep greed from usurping God’s place in each of our lives?

Discuss: A look at our Day Planners or PDAs probably would reveal a lot about our priorities. While it’s easy to say God takes precedence, how we spend our time often suggests otherwise. Where is God on our to-do lists?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: The Bible is full of protagonists bedeviled by greed, from King Ahab and his murderous desire for Naboth’s vineyard (*1 Kings 21*) to Judas and his betrayal of Jesus for 30 pieces of silver (*Matt. 26:15*). How do biblical accounts of greed, including this week’s story about Balaam, help explain why God abhors greed?

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Unnatural Confrontation

Determined in his heart to get the rewards the king offered him, Balaam set out with the men toward Moab. Despite all Balaam's outward professions of fidelity, which he even might have believed himself, the Lord knew what was going on in the man's heart and responded to it.

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

- **What symbolic significance might there be to the fact that the dumb animal was able to see the angel of the Lord and that Balaam, a supposed prophet of God, couldn't?** See *Zeph. 1:17, Matt. 15:14, Rev. 3:17*.
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- **Read Balaam's first response to the donkey after it spoke to him. Think about what was happening. What does Balaam's irrational response reveal about the true nature of his heart and his desire for wealth? After all, what would most people do were an animal to start conversing with them?**
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- **How does this story reveal God's grace, even to Balaam, despite his course of action?**
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A lot has been written over the centuries regarding this, one of the stranger stories in the Bible. Different commentators come away with different interpretations. One point, though, seems clear: Balaam was a man who had a special connection with the Lord. After all, the Lord still was speaking with Him in an intimate manner. And yet, even with this connection, Balaam was determined to do what he himself wanted.

In what ways, even the most subtle ways, do you find yourself fighting against the Lord? That is, you're determined to do what you want even though you know it's not what God wants. How can you overcome this dangerous attitude?

Bible Commentary

Just for Teachers: Consider for a moment the first and last commandments. “‘You shall have no other gods before me’” (*Exod. 20:3, NIV*), says the first. Fourteen verses later, God’s tenth command reverberates over the smoking Mount Sinai: “‘You shall not covet’” (*Exod. 20:17, NIV*). Why would God choose to end the commandments with an injunction against a seemingly petty sin in comparison to murder or idol worship?

The stories below reveal how far from petty covetousness really is and suggest why God chose to bookend His eternal law the way that He did—He knew how easily what we covet can indeed become the “other god” we are in danger of putting before the Lord. In Joshua 6 and 7 and again in 2 Kings 5, we learn what happens when greed elbows God out of our lives—when covetousness becomes idolatry.

I. Achan’s Cover-up (*Review Joshua 6 and 7 with the class.*)

Achan’s story in Joshua 6 and 7 suggests that greed, despite elaborate attempts to conceal it, never affects just the culprit. With the crumbling walls of Jericho still echoing in their ears, the victorious Israelites are told the cursed city’s spoils are not a free-for-all. Yet, one man flouts God’s explicit ban on pillaging; amid the postbattle chaos, Achan sneaks away with a sumptuous robe, 200 silver shekels, and a gold bar worth 50 more shekels. Certain no one will discover his plunder, the smug Achan squirrels it away under his tent. One crushing military defeat later, Joshua begs God to explain the sudden reversal of fates. “I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy the things [taken] under the ban,” God tells Joshua (*Josh. 7:12, NASB*). In Achan’s confession, we learn how greed is a gateway to thievery and guile: “‘I coveted them and took them; and behold, they are concealed in the earth inside my tent’” (*vs. 21, NASB*).

The spoils Achan carried away from Jericho might seem inconsequential, and his punishment might seem excessive, but the story illustrates how dangerous it is to let our desires overshadow God’s commands, and, worse yet, act as if they haven’t.

“The Death of the Righteous”

After the incident with the donkey, Balaam came to Balak. It is interesting to note that Balak brought Balaam to “the high places of Baal” (*Num. 22:41*). Apparently, Near Eastern pagans built their shrines on the tops of mountains so as to be nearer the gods whom they wished to influence. Balaam ordered the king to build at this place seven altars and offer seven bullocks and seven rams thereon.

Read the words that Balaam, controlled by God, spoke over the children of Israel. What powerful message, and promise, is found in them? What hope is offered to us all in them, as well? See *Num. 23:5–10*; see also *1 Corinthians 15*.

“He saw them supported by His arm as they enter the dark valley of the shadow of death. And he beheld them coming forth from their graves, crowned with glory, honor, and immortality. He saw the redeemed rejoicing in the unfading glories of the earth made new. Gazing upon the scene, he exclaimed, ‘Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the fourth part of Israel?’ And as he saw the crown of glory on every brow, the joy beaming from every countenance, and looked forward to that endless life of unalloyed happiness, he uttered the solemn prayer, ‘Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 447.

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

In a sense, these words of God uttered over His ancient people reflect the gospel promise of all of God’s people in every age, the promise of eternal life because of the righteousness of Jesus. None of us are righteous; none of us live or die in and of ourselves with enough righteousness to deliver us from the grave. Only the righteousness of Jesus can, which is credited to us by faith. Here, in the book of Numbers, with the story of Balaam, God is revealing to us the promise of salvation through Jesus.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Discuss: What evidence is there that Balaam believes he can hide his covetousness from God? Note his response to God in Numbers 23:34: “‘I did not realize you were standing in the road to oppose me’” (*NIV*). Balaam may not have seen the armed angel blocking the path to Moab, but does he really think he can fool God by pretending his behavior is aboveboard, especially after God’s previous warnings against his course of action? What steps can we take to avoid Balaam’s presumption?

II. Gehazi’s Audacity (*Review 2 Kings 5 with the class.*)

In 2 Kings 5 Naaman, having just emerged leprosy-free from his seventh dunk in the Jordan River, pressures the prophet Elisha to accept gifts of thanks. The ever-humble Elisha refuses to accept credit for God’s miracle and bids Naaman goodbye, but his servant Gehazi resolves to run Naaman down and “‘as the Lord lives . . . take something’” (*vs. 20, NKJV*). Gehazi soon catches up to Naaman and convinces the captain that Elisha has changed his mind about the gifts. His tale scores him two talents of silver and two changes of clothes.

What’s interesting about Gehazi’s story is his audacity. Having just returned from his unlawful errand, Gehazi doesn’t skulk off guiltily; no—he immediately reports to Elisha, apparently forgetting that the prophet of God probably knows what he’s done. Or perhaps he thinks Elisha will see his side of things. On the way back from cashing in on Naaman’s goodwill, Gehazi probably indulged in plenty of justifying—he was a servant, after all, and not even to a king or captain but to a comparatively lowly prophet. A couple of new changes of clothes would no doubt come in handy. Gehazi might even have convinced himself that need, not greed, had motivated his actions. But warping the story never changes the consequences of sin. Gehazi is stricken with Naaman’s leprosy secondhand. God doesn’t take greed—or our attempts to rationalize it—lightly.

Discuss: By capitalizing on Naaman’s generosity, Gehazi turns a gift into a sin of covetousness. In this week’s lesson, how does greed corrupt Balaam’s gift of prophecy? His better judgment? How does God react when we seek to use His power for evil purposes and then try to justify our actions?

Star and Scepter

Imagine the king’s surprise when Balaam began to bless Israel. Although angry, the king still wasn’t ready to give up. He took the prophet to another mountain peak where he could see only a small part of Israel and built another seven altars, offering again bullocks and rams. Balaam “went not, as at other times, to seek for enchantments” (*Num. 24:1*). Yet again, instead of Balak getting the curse that he was willing to pay so much for, Balaam—under the control of God—uttered another blessing over Israel. A third time Balak arranged for seven altars and their sacrifices on another peak, but Balaam knew it was useless to ask God for permission to use magic on Israel. Looking on Israel’s encampment from this third angle, he blessed the nation again (*Num. 23:27–30, 24:1–10*), and Balak sent him home in disgrace for his failure to curse Israel.

Read the parable Balaam told in Numbers 24:15–17. What was this a prophecy of, and how was it fulfilled? *Gen. 49:10; Matt. 2:1, 2.*

“Seeking clearer knowledge, [the wise men] turned to the Hebrew Scriptures. . . . Balaam belonged to the magicians, though at one time a prophet of God; by the Holy Spirit he had foretold the prosperity of Israel and the appearing of the Messiah. . . . The prophecy of Balaam had declared, ‘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 harbinger of the Promised One?”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 59, 60.

Bible students long have seen in these words a Messianic prediction, that of the coming Redeemer, Jesus. The image of a scepter (power) and a star (light) both are apt symbols of Jesus. Though the Lord used, at the time of the prophecy itself, local symbols, which would have meaning to those who heard it then, the principle behind the prophecy—that of Christ’s power and victory—apply to the whole world. Jesus is the Light of the world and the rightful Owner of it, and no matter what humans’ plans are, in the end the whole world will see Him prevail. *See Isa. 45:23, Rom. 14:11, Phil. 2:10.*

However much injustice in the world, we have the promise that God will prevail and that justice will, as well. How does that promise help you cope with all the injustice you see now?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED► **STEP 3—Apply****Thought Questions:**

- 1 “There is no disease like covetousness,” said Chanakya, an ancient Indian politician and writer. How does greed grip Balaam like a disease? When does he “contract” it; what are its “symptoms”? What is the antidote to greed? The stories of Achan and Gehazi offer little promise of cure. Is Balaam’s story any more hopeful? Explain.
- 2 “Charity gives itself rich; covetousness hoards itself poor,” goes a German proverb. Achan hid his stolen goods. Gehazi stashed away his ill-gotten gifts and pretended he’d done nothing wrong. Balaam got up early to ride with Balak’s ambassadors to Moab, as if he could get a head start on God. Why do you think greed still seems to be so enticing a temptation for most of us?

Application Questions:

- 1 Many of us live in a monstrously materialistic society. How does the latter part of Psalm 62:10 suggest that the Christian should keep money and possessions in perspective?
- 2 Discuss the concept of “healthy” desire with the class. Why is it OK, or not OK, to find motivation in our needs and wants? For example, without bills to pay, families to provide for, and 401(k)s to fund, some of us might be a little less productive at work. But at what point does a seemingly innocuous desire become covetousness? How does the Christian keep desires from morphing into all-consuming greed?

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: This week we learned what happens when we put greed before God. Encourage your class members to take candid stock of their lives—their pastimes, their preoccupations, their priorities. Where does God factor in each category?

Greed is sometimes easily disguised. “ ‘With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain’ ” (*Ezek. 33:31, NIV*). Just as Gehazi conned Naaman out of gifts with his fabricated story of two needy servants, are we sometimes tempted to frame our desires as the needs of others? Evaluate the motivation driving your decisions this week. With God’s help, what practical steps can you take to ensure that the passage above doesn’t describe your actions?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Balaam,” pp. 438–452, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; “The Beatitudes,” pp. 17–44; “The Spirituality of the Law,” pp. 45–58, in *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*.

“He who will abuse animals because he has them in his power is both a coward and a tyrant. A disposition to cause pain, whether to our fellow men or to the brute creation, is satanic. Many do not realize that their cruelty will ever be known, because the poor dumb animals cannot reveal it. But could the eyes of these men be opened, as were those of Balaam, they would see an angel of God standing as a witness, to testify against them in the courts above. A record goes up to heaven, and a day is coming when judgment will be pronounced against those who abuse God’s creatures.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 443.

Discussion Questions:

1 What are some other spiritual lessons we can take away from the story of Balaam? What does it teach, for instance, about God’s sovereignty, about human free will and God’s providence, or about human sinfulness?

2 Dwell more on this idea of the “death of the righteous.” If you were to die today, would it be a “death of the righteous”? Justify your answer.

3 Money is such an incredibly corrupting influence in all areas of life, including our religious life. How can we, as Christians, protect ourselves, our faith, and our church from the potentially corrupting influence of money?

4 Read Jude 11 and Revelation 2:14, which, aside from the verses we already looked at in 2 Peter, are the only other New Testament references to Balaam. What can we learn from them that can help us better understand where Balaam went astray?

Summary: The account of Balaam’s attempt to curse Israel in return for riches and honor brings out into the open his inordinate greed and covetousness. The tenth commandment warns us away from this sinful human trait. None of us is immune to this, or to any other sin, which if not overcome can lead to our final ruin. How important it is that we learn from Balaam’s mistakes.