

Numbers 22

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 November 2018

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] Numbers at 22. On the 24th of September 2002, Tony Blair, do you remember him? He made a statement to the House of Commons. Let me quote from that statement. He said, Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction program is active, detailed and growing. Iraq has chemical and biological weapons.

And he went on to state, quite famously, that they were capable of being launched in 45 minutes. Do you remember that? And that was a lie. And the Prime Minister knew that it was a lie. It was an excuse for the invasion of Iraq.

They were famous, weren't they? Weapons of mass destruction. But it wasn't the first time that people looked for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. It happened nearly 3,500 years ago, earlier, in the chapter that we read from, in God's Word.

And the weapon of mass destruction wasn't a bomb or a germ. It was a man. And it was a man called Balaam, or Balaam, if you're a Hebrew scholar. He lived on the banks of the Euphrates River in modern Iraq. And he was widely believed to be able to cause more destruction in battle than whole armies. He was believed to be a weapon of mass destruction.

And what he blessed was blessed. And what Balaam cursed was cursed. And our interest in the passage is exactly the same as it was for the people of God who first read this passage.

[1 : 33] Because, and what we've got in 22, 23 and 24, is an example of how God protects his people. That there is absolutely nothing which can harm the people of God, which he doesn't permit to happen.

And if you have a tendency to worry about things, if you sometimes feel intimidated by the forces of evil against you, or against Christianity, well, Numbers 22 to 24 are some of the most encouraging chapters in all of the Old Testament.

I want us to see four things at night. Verses 1 to 7. I want us to see God's people threatened. God's people threatened. And we're told, aren't we, verse 1, that the people of Israel, they set out and they camped at the plain of Moab, beyond the Jordan at Jericho.

Balaam was the king of Moab. And he looked at the vast multitude of the people of Israel. And we're told in verse 3 and 4, well, he was in great dread. He was overcome with fear.

And he says to his allies, this horde, it's a lovely expression, will now lick up all that is around us. As the ox licks up the grass.

[2 : 47] He feels intimidated and threatened by the people. He thought of them as an invading army. Now he had no fear, didn't he, to reason to fear. Israel presented no risk to Moab.

Why did they present no risk? Well, because we've been told already, they had been forbidden by God to attack Moab. The people of God were not to do Moab any harm whatsoever. We read that in Deuteronomy chapter 2, verse 9.

Do not harass Moab. Or contend with them in battle. For I will not give you any of their land. God had said to the people of Israel, leave Moab alone. They're your kindred.

They're your people. Don't attack them. So the king of Moab was worrying about something that was never going to happen. Pull up your hand if you've never worried about something that is never going to happen.

No hands up. I'm not surprised. We do it all the time, don't we? We worry about things that are never going to happen. In any case, to counter this threat, he plans to employ with his Midianite allies the weapon of mass destruction.

[4 : 00] This seer, or a prophet named Balaam. He's a man with a great reputation. So in 1967, there was a fragment of a temple that was dug up in the Jordan.

It was dated from about 700 BC. See, that's about 700 or 800 years after Numbers 22. And on that fragment of temple wall dug up in 1967 was written the name of Balaam, the son of Beor, the seer of the gods.

He was very, very well known. 700 years later, many miles, hundreds of miles away from his home, people still remembered him. So this is a very, very important prophet indeed.

And the messengers travel 10 days from Moab to Balaam's home. And they have a large payment and a request, verse 6. Come now. Come and curse this people for me.

Since they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I should be able to defeat them and drive them from the land. And so note, this is the statement of the king of Moab to Balaam.

[5 : 07] And he says, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed and he whom you curse is cursed. And so here is, isn't it, a direct challenge to the living God. Here is a fist shaken against God.

What God had said of Israel, isn't it, the great covenant promise, the theme tune of the Bible. That I will be your God and I will bless you. And I will bless those who bless you.

And him who dishonours you, I will curse. But now, this heathen king says to this heathen prophet, you've got the power to do it. You can do what God said he would do.

You can counter God. You can curse God's people. And so the question is, who's going to win in 22 to 24 of Numbers? God or man? God's blessing or man's curse?

And who is going to be stronger? Well, we're going to see. God's people threatened. And so nothing has changed, has it?

[6 : 06] In the 21st century, God's people are still threatened. The Lord Jesus said in John 15, because you are not of the world, therefore the world hates you. And that hatred of the Christian gospel is daily.

It's more and more evident in society in hundreds of different ways. And the hatred for Jesus Christ and his salvation and his God is bubbling away under the surface.

And occasionally it pops up. Behind all of that is the unsleeping and the ill will and the malice of the devil. The rulers and the authorities, the cosmic powers, the present darkness.

And so you must make no mistake about it if you're a Christian tonight. The devil has his eye on you. And the devil hates you. And the devil wants to do you harm.

And the devil wants to damage you. And the devil has his eye on Christ's church and he wants to damage it and destroy it. The devil hates the people of God. Mighty, dark forces are set against us.

[7 : 21] And we would be really naive, wouldn't we, at the start of a new chapter in our church life, not to take account of that, not to realise that that is a reality. That the devil goes about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

He never sleeps, he never rests. His hatred is unceasing. And you and I are threatened at every moment. And we are threatened by an enemy who seems very intimidating.

And we need to remember that at the time, Israel knew nothing about this, did they? As far as we know, they did not know that the king of Moab had sent Balaam. They didn't know what he was planning.

That this was happening, they knew nothing of it. And often we don't know. We don't know what the devil is planning against us. And we don't know what attacks will come our way. And we don't know what temptations or discouragements will face us tomorrow, or this week, or even tonight.

We don't know what he has in store. And very often we don't realise that we are being attacked. The devil might be attacking you psychologically, or physically, or spiritually.

[8 : 25] In many ways. And often we don't realise what is going on. And so that's the first thing God's people threaten. But secondly, verses 8 to 21, we have God's prohibition challenged.

God's prohibition, that means God says no, challenged. Look at verse 12. Because God decisively forbids Balaam from accepting the commission.

Verse 12. God said to Balaam, you shall not go with them. You shall not curse the people.

For they are blessed. It's pretty clear, isn't it? Balaam, the New Testament tells us, was a greedy, money-centred, wicked man.

And he hates to give up this huge bribe that he's offered. And he's eager to accept it. If only he can find a way of doing it. And you see that in his reply of verse 13.

[9 : 28] He says to them, so Balaam rose early in the morning and said to the prince of Moab, go to your own land, for the Lord has refused to let me go with you. It's interesting, isn't it?

Go back to your own land, because the Lord has refused to let me go with you. What do you think the implication is there? Do you remember when you were young?

It doesn't happen so much now. But when your friends came to your front door, and they said, and we're going to play football in the park. And you gave this reply, or I gave this reply, my dad won't let me go out to play with you until I've finished my homework.

Who am I blaming there? What am I saying there? My dad won't let me go out to play with you until I've finished my homework. What you're saying is, I'd love to go and play with you.

But unfortunately, my miserable old man, he won't let me go until my homework is finished. If it wasn't for him, I'd be out there kicking the ball with you. And that is exactly what Balaam is saying in verse 13.

[10:33] The Lord has refused to let me go with you. I want to go with you. I'd love to go with you. Perhaps if I had a little bit more money, I would be able to go with you. But so far, the Lord won't let me go.

And so a higher-powered deputation come back with more money, and they make the request again. And Balaam's answer at first seems an excellent answer. Verse 18. But remember, he's a politician.

He plays with words. He makes his living with words. You can't believe what he says. Verse 18. But Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the Lord my God to do less or more.

You see, that's a wonderful answer. But he gives the game away in verse 19. So you too, please stay here tonight, that I may know what more the Lord will say to me.

It's remarkable. We feel like saying to you, what was not clear about verse 12? You shall not go with them. What part of that did you not understand, Balaam?

[11:42] What part of that was too difficult? He said, well, maybe he'll change his mind. Maybe he'll say something else. Maybe a door will open. Here is a man who's determined to have his own way. To find some way of wriggling around God's clear commands.

To manipulate somehow. That he can persuade God to let him do what he wants. And I want to say to you, that is a very, very dangerous course to pursue.

Because God does let him do what he wants to do. And God is angry with him, and God is displeased with him at his attitude. But in his anger, he permits him to have his own way.

But he warns him that he is on a very short leash. So look at verse 20. God said to Balaam at night, and said to him, if the men have come to call you, rise, go with them, but only do what I tell you.

So Balaam rose in the morning, sat with his donkey, and went with the princess of Moab. Of course, Balaam does not give them the last bit of information in verse 20, but only do what I tell you.

[12:47] He doesn't tell them that. He hides that. Well, God says to Balaam, I've told you not to go. I don't want you to go. But if you're determined to go, on your own head, be it. I'll permit you to go, but I will be controlling what you will be saying.

You will be saying exactly what I want you to say. And so Balaam rose in the morning, sat with his donkey, and went. And he thinks he's got a way with his disobedience. He thinks he's succeeded. He thinks he's gone round God.

He thinks he's bent God's will to his will. And he thinks he's got his own way. That he is going to curse the people of God. And that's exactly what the forces of evil are doing in the world today. That's what unbelievers think that they're accomplishing. They think that they're succeeding. They think they're getting their own way. They think they're in control of their lives. They think they're getting the better of God.

And I think tragically, the church in this country is often like that from time to time. And as individuals, we can be like it, that God tells us something we're not to do. And we try to persuade ourselves that somehow, in some way, we can ease our way round the prohibition of God and make it all right.

[14:05] But so it happens, doesn't it, with remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. It happens in the area of sex before marriage. It happens in the area of going out with non-Christians. It's happening in the area of homosexuality.

That we seem to persuade ourselves that somehow, in some way, we can ease our way round the clear prohibition of God and make it all right. And here's the remarkable thing, which I think we don't often realise, is that God doesn't stop us, but he's angry.

God's prohibition challenge. Sometimes, tragically, God lets us have what we want, doesn't he? Thirdly, God's power revealed, verses 22 to 34.

So boys and girls, we're here, aren't we? God's power revealed the talking donkey. And you were waiting. I've got the talking. Numbers is a great book. It gets more and more bizarre.

This is what Balaam is known for, isn't it? The bit that jumps out. The donkey that opens her mouth and starts talking. The donkey sees the angel of the Lord, what a great picture, standing with a drawn sword.

[15 : 15] I would want to say to you, that angel of the Lord, according to Calvin, according to every theologian until about the 20th century, would have been the incarnate, pre-incarnate Lord Jesus.

They see the angel of the Lord with his sword. The donkey turns into a field and Balaam beats her. Again, she sees the angel and she crushes Balaam's foot against the wall and Balaam beats her. And finally she lies down and Balaam beats the donkey with a stick and he wishes he could kill her. And what happens? The donkey protests. It is funny, isn't it?

She opens her mouth, she starts talking to Balaam and Balaam answers. And the donkey is a conversation with Balaam. That great little bit, isn't it?

Where a slightly crestfallen Balaam answers at the end of his story. The donkey said to Balaam, am I not your donkey on which you've ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat you this way? Balaam said no.

[16 : 24] And then Balaam's eyes are opened and he sees the angel of the Lord against him. It's so embarrassing, isn't it? It's so, so embarrassing. Your atheist friend says to you tomorrow, you believe the Bible, don't you?

You would call yourself a Bible-believing Christian. And you would say, yeah, I am. I read the Bible, I love the Bible. I stand on the truth of the Bible and he says, well, what about the talking donkey?

The donkey opens her mouth and talks to Balaam and then they have a conversation isn't it ridiculous? Isn't it? Of course it is. It's absolutely ridiculous.

It is ludicrous. It is plain silly. It's exactly what it's meant to be. That's exactly what it's meant to be because this is why God performs this miracle, this absurd miracle to show how ridiculous it is for any little human being to think that you can oppose Almighty God.

To stand against God, it's stupid, isn't it? It's ludicrous. For any human being to think that they can curse those that God is blessing, that they can harm those whom God has pledged to protect.

[17 : 41] And so the Lord, in his wisdom and his power, performs a miracle that is meant to make us roar with laughter. The incident is full of riotous humour. It is full of stinging irony.

Here is the greatest prophet in all the world, the world champion seer, and yet he can't see as much as a donkey can see. That he claims to be able to harm a mighty people, and yet he can't even make his donkey walk straight along the road.

And he wishes that he had a sword to kill the donkey, but he doesn't realise that the donkey is keeping him from being pierced by the sword of the angel of the Lord.

The prophet's mouth is closed, but the donkey speaks the truth. Here is the greatest super prophet. Here is the prophet of mass destruction.

Here is the intimidating figure whom Balak is going to pay to curse the people of Israel. And who is he? Well, he's a helpless, pathetic fool. And he's a picture of all the Balaams of our world.

[18 : 50] He's a picture of all the Balaams of our world. And so the clever people with all their great learning and great reputations, the great scientists, the stand-up comedians who think that they're going to overcome the cause of Christ and belittle it.

And that they will prove the Bible wrong and they will destroy the Christian faith and they will damage the Church of Christ who boasts of their great reputations.

He whom you bless is blessed and he whom you curse is cursed. And they sound so impressive and they seem so intimidating and yet God makes fools of them.

And to make fools of them, God uses donkeys like you and me to make fools of them. Sounds like we're boasting, doesn't it?

But we don't. We're not boasting that we have been shown, our eyes have been opened and so we have more insights than they do. We can see what they don't see. Hasn't that been your experience as you talk with people who are unbelievers?

[20 : 00] God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. And God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

And if an unbeliever says to you tomorrow, well I think the story of Balaam and the donkey is a very, very silly story, you say to them, of course it is. But if you live your life in opposition to God, that is a very foolish way to live your life.

And that's the message of Balaam and the donkey. That's why God put that speech into the dumb animal's mouth to teach you a lesson. That he who sits in the heavens laughs. He holds them in derision.

He will speak to them in his wrath and terrify them in his fury. He will say, as for me, I sent my king in Zion. And if any of you tonight, if you are sitting there and you think, well actually I'm going to run my own life and I'm in charge of my own life and I don't need God and actually I can manage without God and I'd be better off without all this and I can plan my own course away from God, then you're as blind and as weak and as foolish and as helpless as the prophet Balaam.

And God is able to embarrass you and fill you with shame and use someone or something as foolish as a brute beast. God does that, doesn't he?

[21 : 28] God can interrupt the blood flow in one tiny little vessel in your brain, a tiny thing like that and then where is your wisdom and where is your power? They bring you down.

A little germ or a little clot. A little screw loose in the wheel of your car and God can take you from this earth. And here is Balaam, he's full of his own importance and confidence and he is humiliated and he is silenced and he is shown by God speaking through the mouth of this animal what a fool he is.

God's power revealed and then lastly verses 35 to 41, God's purpose fulfilled. God's purpose fulfilled and Balaam is frightened, isn't he?

He offers to abandon the journey, he says in verse 35, 34, and Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, I have sinned for I did not know that you stood in the road against me.

Now for therefore if it is evil in your sight I will turn back but God has got other plans and God says, no Balaam, you finish your journey, you will do what I want you to do. Not what you wanted, not what the king of Moab wants and you will say the message that I say to you.

[22 : 40] Not the message that you want to say as we're going to see later in the passage. Instead of you cursing my people, I'm going to use you to bless my people and I'm going to turn Balaam's plan against him and I'm going to turn the plan against you.

I'm going to use your greedy intrigues, your desire for money for my own purposes. And he goes on his way but God is going to use him in spite of himself and Balaam has not changed, he's still a wicked man, he's still a greedy man.

We see that later on in the story. He's going to die on the field of battle, he's going to be judged for the temptations he brings against Israel. He is still eager in his heart to damage Israel.

But as he's taken to the mountain and Israel is spread out before him, he's ready to give his prophecy. And we're going to see in the next study, next week, that the enemies of God are in for an unpleasant surprise because he's going to bring a message very different from what they planned.

But just note how encouraging this is. Note how encouraging this message is for Israel. They're about to enter the promised land and God is saying all the king's horses and all the king's men can't harm you.

[24 : 03] All the Balaks of the world and all the Balaams of the world can't harm you. Nobody can harm you apart from my will. They can get their profits, they can deploy the weapons of mass destruction, they can attack, they can plan, they can do what they like but they will not harm you.

We're going to see later that people can harm themselves, that people can harm themselves. But what an encouraging word. And for us too it's an encouraging word because we've got no need to worry.

We've got no need to be frightened by the forces of evil. that God is committed to blessing us and God will bless us and God will protect us.

C.H. Spurgeon wrote this. He writes, Anxiety does nothing to rob tomorrow of its sorrows. It only robs today of its strength.

It's a creature. Spurgeon writes, Anxiety does nothing to rob tomorrow of its sorrows. it only robs today of its strength. And this passage also fills us with gratitude for God's mercy because we were all like Balaam.

[25 : 19] We were all like this prophet stubbornly heading our own way captured by our own idols. We all wanted to carry out our plans for our own purposes and for many of us here they're came

that time didn't it?

That day when the angel of the Lord stood in the way. And the angel of the Lord stopped us. But he didn't have a drawn sword in his hand because the sword had already been pledged into the heart of God's son for our sake.

And because of that the angel of the Lord met us in mercy and in peace to turn us back to a life of obedience grace and blessing. If you like that sword has become a cross the cross of Christ that stops us on our path and reminds us and turns us round that if you are a believer tonight this table tells you God is determined to bless you.

God is determined to bless you. and nothing in the universe can ever prevent it. Let's pray.