

Numbers 23, 24

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[0 : 00] Numbers 23 and 24. How secure is your future? How secure the future? Predicting the future was Balaam's job. Balaam is not a prophet. He was a wizard really.

! He sounds like a prophet, doesn't he? It was a Hebrew prophet's job to bring the word of God to God's people. Which isn't necessarily about predicting the future, although sometimes that does happen. But Balaam was a wizard. Balaam was a shaman. He was a soothsayer.

And predicting the future was his core business. And predicting the future is a tricky business. In 1929, a professor at Yale University publicly went on records saying that stocks had reached what looked like a permanently high plateau.

That was a few months before the Wall Street crash. In 1962, Decker Records famously turned down the opportunity to sign a group, a pop group with the words, we don't let their sound and guitar music is on the way out. And so they missed the opportunity to sign the Beatles.

In 1977, our man called Ken Olson, he was president and founder of Digital Equipment Corporation, declared that there was no reason why anyone would want a computer in their home.

[1 : 31] And so predicting the future is a really dangerous business. Controlling the future, though, is even more difficult. And that is what people want to do. We want to be in control of our future, don't we?

We want to be in control of our lives. People want to be the captain of their own fate, the master of their own destiny. And that's why we take out insurance policies.

Have you noticed that? I don't watch a great deal of TV, but when I do, I'm amazed how much insurance advertising there is. And on the tube. It just shows, doesn't it, how insecure we all feel. Why is there so much insurance advertising? Well, it's about predicting and controlling the future.

So we can take out insurance against ageing. So if you can do anything about that. Against sickness. Against sickness. Against death. Against a downturn in the economy. You can take out an insurance policy, can't you? There's a big ad on the tube that if you have an untimely death, there's a payout then.

Which I assume goes to your family. And it's all about wanting to have control and keep control of our lives. And that is what Balak is all about. He's a Moabite king. That's what he's concerned about in these chapters.

[2 : 44] What do you do when the light that you can see at the end of the tunnel is actually an express train rushing towards you and threatening to take you out? What do you do in a situation like that? That's the situation Balak is facing. Just come back to chapter 22 in verse 4.

He can see the light at the end of the tunnel, but it's a train, an express train. And he's heard the sound of it. He's heard what Israel has done to Zion and Og.

And now Israel is coming his way. And so in verse 4 of chapter 22, he says, This horde will now lick up all that is around us as the ox licks up the grass in the field.

And so the Israelites are coming. Like an express train. And it's something that Balak is a concern about. How do you insure against that? Now we need to put ourselves in his shoes and we need to have some sympathy for this pagan king.

He's wondering to control his future and the future of his people. That is his job as king. And he's wondering to control the future of his people. What can you do to secure, to be secure and to be happy in the future?

[3 : 52] How does blessing come? That's what we're going to look at tonight. And I just want us to have two points. First of all, negatively and positively. To look at that question negatively and positively. How can you be secure?

How do you secure the future? Where does blessing come from? Security and happiness. How do you get that? How do you get a measure of control over the future? Well, it doesn't come from do-it-yourself.

And that's what Balak is attempting to do in these chapters. He's threatened by Israel, so he hires Balaam to curse Israel. He's taking out an insurance policy to secure his future and the future of his people.

And that is what he's doing. And he's willing to pay big, big money for it. And it doesn't come cheap. That's the first thing I want you to notice. It's an expensive policy that he's taking out.

So he'd have to send envoys to Balaam to persuade him to come. Now, that's ten days each way, both times, because Balaam didn't come the first time. And that's forty days of travel for a bunch of people, whose time is not cheap.

[4 : 58] And when Balaam finally turns up, Balak throws a lavish feast to welcome him. Look at chapter 22 and verse 40. And Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep and sent for Balaam and the princes who were with him.

And then in chapter 23, verse 1, he offers three sets of sacrifices. And each time there's not just one altar, but seven altars. And that's standard pagan practice. There are seven altars, and not just a bull and ram, but a bull and a ram.

And the two most expensive animals. And then on top of that, there's Balaam's feed. He is a wizard with an international reputation. And it's expensive. Balaam has to pay for this insurance policy, but it's uncertain, like most insurance policies.

It's uncertain. You have to read the small print. And we ask this other question, as you look through these chapters, why is it that Balaam asks Balaam to prophesy three times in three different locations from three different vantage points?

It didn't work the first time, you see, look at verse 13 of chapter 23. It didn't work the first time, so Balaam says, well, come with thee to another place. Where you can see only a part, but not all of them.

[6 : 18] It's as if he's saying, if you can't curse them all, Balaam, well, at least you can curse some of them. And it's a bit disappointing. So he takes them to a different location, and then in verse 27 of 23, it happens again.

And Balaam said to Balaam, come now, I will take you to another place. Perhaps it will please God that you may curse them for me from there. It's not working. Perhaps it will please God to let you curse God from there.

And then you'll see, as he says in 23, in verse 3, Balaam gives no guarantee at all, does he? Look what he says in verse 3. He says, stand beside your burnt offering, and I will go, perhaps, perhaps, the Lord will come to meet me in whatever he shows me, I will tell you.

So Balaam is spending, Balaam is spending all this money, and he's got no guarantee. He's got no guarantee that it's money well spent. It's not much of an insurance policy. And in fact, it is worse than useless.

Because what we read in the chapter is Balaam gets the exact reverse of what he wants. And what he's looking for. Instead of cursing Israel, Balaam blesses Israel.

[7 : 32] Over and over and over again. And God puts words, in fact God puts the Abrahamic covenant, into the mouth of a pagan prophet.

Balaam did not have Genesis. He'd not been reading Genesis in his quiet time. Balaam didn't know anything at all about Abraham. And yet, over and over again, God puts the words of what he says to Abraham, into the mouth of Balaam, again and again.

So what were those words? Well, you know them, don't you? They're very, very well known. It's Genesis chapter 12. And God says, I will bless you. And I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

And I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you, I will curse. And in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. And over and over again, Balaam has to say, doesn't he? I cannot curse whom God has blessed. I can't do it. I can't do it. God has blessed them, and so I can't curse them. And Balaam eventually gives him up and sends him away unpaid.

[8 : 42] And then Balaam throws in the greatest blessing of all, free of charge. Right at the very end, he preaches the gospel. And the great irony of this is, chapter 22-24 of Numbers, is this was all completely unnecessary.

Because Israel had no intention of invading Moab. If you turn over to M.T. John Leach, chapter 2, verse 9, let me just read it to you. What God says, he says, And the Lord says to me, Do not harass Moab, or contend with them in battle, for I will not give you any of their land for possession. It was never God's intention for Israel to go to war with Moab. And so Balaam is worrying about nothing. It was never going to happen.

So often, like Balaam, we fret and fear needlessly. And if we only knew our Bible better, we would know that there's no cause to fear. Of course, Balaam didn't have a Bible, but you and I do. And as we read the Bible, as we read all of the Bible, it strengthens our faith. And you may not know what the future holds, you don't, but you do know who holds the future.

[9 : 55] And you cannot read the Bible, all of the Bible, and not know that God is absolutely sovereign, and the Bible is proof of that. So before we move on, let's think, what does this look like in 21st century clothing?

People look for security and blessing, don't they, in all the wrong places. They look for a sense of security, and they look for a sense of identity in money, in their possessions.

They look for a sense of identity in their image, in their reputation, in the job that they do, in their leisure, in their pleasure, in all the wrong places. And we can call it idolatry. Because that is to look everywhere else except where we ought to look.

And that is how blessing doesn't come. So secondly, positively, how does it come? And I want you to notice a startling contrast between the way Balaam goes around securing his future, trying to do it himself, and trying to take out this insurance, policy, and note the startling contrast between Moab and Israel.

Because Israel didn't have to do anything to secure their future. They don't have to build multiple altars, and offer multiple sacrifice. Look at verses 19 and 20 of chapter 23.

[11 : 19] It says, God is not man, that he should lie. Or son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it?

Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it? Behold, I received a command to bless. He has blessed, and I cannot provoke it.

That is where your security lies. That is where your happiness tonight lies. In the word of God that cannot lie. God has committed himself to these people, doesn't he?

In an everlasting covenant. And that cannot, and will not ever be broken. And so as Balaam surveys the plains of Moab, and sees the people of Israel stretched out there in front of him, on the plains of Moab, what he sees is God's word being fulfilled.

It's so beautiful, isn't it? He talks about the tents of Jacob. Look at verses 8 to 10 of 23. Verse 8 to 10.

[12 : 29] How can I curse... Shall I get those curses out quickly before I come and take them? Alright. Verse 8. How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced?

For from the top of the crags I see him. From the hills I behold him. Behold a people dwelling alone, and not counting itself among the nations. Who can count the dust of Jacob?

Or number the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the upright. And let my end be like his. What he's saying there, he's saying, isn't he, here is a nation that's different, that's distinct from all the other nations.

He says then, doesn't he, who can count the dust of Jacob? Or number the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous. Let my end be like his. He's envious of the people of God.

Let me read to you Genesis 13, verse 16, where God says what he will do for his people. And so that their land, the land could not, chapter 12 and verse, sorry, it's not Genesis 12, it's not Genesis 12, it's not Genesis 13, it's Genesis 15, isn't it?

[13 : 54] 13, it's Genesis 13, and verse 6. 16, Genesis 16, where are we? Genesis 16, verse 13. Genesis 13, 16.

Genesis 13, 16. You're right. Let's take a break for a moment and get my head together. Genesis 13, and verse 16. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.

So can you imagine how encouraged the people of Israel must have been? When they heard the report of Balaam's prophecy, who can count the dust of Jacob?

God had made that promise, had to be, to a geriatric couple who didn't have any children. God made an impossible promise to Abraham and Sarah that they would father a nation, that Abraham would be a father of nations, and his offspring would be more than the dust of the earth. And who can count the dust of Jacob? Here it is, before his very eyes, you see. Here is the pagan prophet who wouldn't have known what God said to Abraham, and he asks, who can count the dust of Jacob?

[15:07] Israel is multiplied just as God has promised, from that old childless couple to a vast, distinct nation from all the other nations of the world. And they're well on their way to entering the land that God has promised them, to be God's people in God's place under God's protection.

All with the purpose that they can bring God's blessing to the ends of the earth, and it's being fulfilled. It's coming to fruition. And over and over and over again, Balaam has to say to Balaam, how can I curse what God has blessed?

It's interesting, when you get to chapter 24 and verse 1, Balaam has to give up on his sorcery. That's what he's being paid for. He's a sorcerer. He's a wizard. And the art of wizardry is to manipulate spiritual forces, to propitiate the gods, to satisfy the gods.

That is what his job is, and that is what he's being hired to do, and that is what he's trying to do, but he can't do it. So in chapter 24, verse 1, when Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, he did not go as at other times to look for omens, but set his face towards the wilderness.

And Balaam lifted up his eyes and saw Israel camping tribe by tribe. And guess what happened? And the Spirit of God came upon him. He gives up sorcery and the Spirit of God comes upon him.

[16:25] He realises that God, the God of Israel, that Yahweh is the living God and the true God. That God cannot be manipulated, that he cannot change his mind. He's not a man that you can change his mind, and God cannot lie.

The God who's entered into covenant, so they have the word of God. And they have a God who's committed himself to his people by an everlasting covenant. But there's something else here. Let me point it out to you to secure their future.

Look at chapter 21 and verse 23. Sorry, it's not chapter 21.

What has happened to my notes tonight? It's verse 23 of 24. We're going to get there in the end tonight.

I'm in a disaster. So let me keep going, and I will figure out the verse. So if you look at the poetry of verses 18, in chapter 23, and particularly in chapter 24, you will see great beauty and really powerful images.

[17:53] And what God is describing, particularly in verses 3 to 9 of 24, is really very much like the Garden of Eden. God's people are back where they're meant to be, aren't they?

Can you see that picture? And the land is flowing with milk and honey. It's like the Garden of Eden. And he's looking from this great height as they're about to enter the promised land.

And he says in verse 21 of chapter 24, he says, enduring is your dwelling place and your nest is set in the rock. There's going to be no misfortune come upon you.

And then he speaks, doesn't he, the shout of a king is amongst them. Can you see that? Where's the shout of the king amongst them?

That's not a rhetorical question. 23, 21. And he looked, and that's 24, 21. 23, 21. He's not beheld misfortune in Jacob, nor has he seen trouble in Israel.

[18:57] The Lord their God is with them and the shout of a king is amongst them. Why is that shocking? Anybody wants to shout out, why is that shocking?

They have no king, do they? You know that from your house groups, don't you? They don't have a king yet. All the nations have kings, but they didn't have a king.

It's chapter 24 and verse 7. Water shall flow from his buckets and his seed shall be in many waters. His king shall be higher than Agag. Agag was the king of the Amalekites.

We're not sure whether that's his personal name or whether it was a dynastic name like Pharaoh or Caesar. But the Amalekites were Israel's great enemies and we know that in the time of Saul and David, Agag was destroyed.

But this prophecy isn't exhausted in the reign of David. Go on to verse 17 of chapter 24. And I see him, but not now.

[19:59] I behold him, but not near. And then this, a star shall come out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel and shall cross the forehead and break down all the sons of Sheth.

Verse 19. And a ruler, welcome out of Jacob, who's going to destroy all the ancient enemies of God's people. Verse 17.

I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. And many centuries later, wise men came from the east. Not three kings from the Orient. We don't know the three of them. We don't know what their names were. That's all mythology.

But we do know that wise men, magi, astrologers like Balaam came from the same place that Balaam came from. From the Tigris, Euphrates Valley, from Iraq and Iran, that sort of area.

And they came to Jerusalem to an Edomite king, King Haraj, who didn't have any right to be on the throne. He was half Edomite. And they came to Jerusalem to the Edomite on the throne of Judah.

[21 : 02] And they said to him, where is he who has been born king of the Jews? And the implication is this, isn't it? It is, Herod, you are an imposter. That's certainly how Herod took it. That's why he slaughtered all those children.

He was an insecure, paranoid man. Because the wise men came with this question, where is he who is born king of the Jews? The king who has been prophesied. This king who is King David's greatest son.

And yes, the promise is fulfilled partially in the days of David, but not completely. It's not exalted. Where is he who is born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star.

Star of wonder, star of night. Star of royal beauty bright. There's great interest in astrology, as if the stars have got nothing to do with you.

As if the stars shaped your destiny. I hope you don't read the stars. If you ever do, as I read mine the other day, they don't tell you anything that you didn't know. Is there a message for you in the stars?

[22 : 06] Well yeah, there is actually. There is a sense. What does that sound? Sam, we sang it earlier on, didn't we? The heavens declare the glory of God. That's the message of the psalms.

It's not about you. It's about him. Day and night, it says in that psalm that we read, you go out and look at the stars and you feel how small and how significant you are. But that message comes through 24-7.

It's not about you and your bank balance and that you might meet a tall, dark stranger. How ridiculous to think that the stars shape our destiny and have something to say to us. No, it's about him.

It's if I were the centre of the universe. No, he is. He made the starry skies. That's the message. The one who created this universe, the one who flung stars into space, has entered into his creation, his own creation.

And without ceasing to be what he eternally was, he became what he eternally was not. He is the baby in the manger in Bethlehem. It is as if the whole cosmos is pointing a great starry finger to that little house in Bethlehem where the baby was born.

[23 : 12] And that baby himself claims this prophecy has his own. Maybe you want to come with me to write to the end of the Bible and we'll see that in Revelation chapter 22. It's the last chapter of the Bible and Jesus takes these words to himself.

He says there in verse 16 of Revelation 22, he says, I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches.

I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star. And then there's that invitation, isn't there, which comes hot on the heels.

The spirit and the bride say, come. Let the one who hears say, come. Let the one who is thirsty come. Let the one who desires to take the water of life without price.

Jesus identifies himself as the one who is the fulfilment of Balaam's prophecy. Blessing comes through him. It's because of him.

[24 : 22] He took the curse so that we are blessed. He took the curse upon himself. It's all wrapped up in him. And so to have Christ in your life is to be blessed.

not to have Christ in your life is ultimately to be cursed. And so I'll ask you as I close, there's a warning here, isn't there?

Have you embraced Christ as your king? And Balaam wanted to and yet he didn't. That is the warning, isn't it, I think, of verse 10 of chapter 23.

See what he says there? Almost in spite of himself, almost despite himself, let me die the death of the upright and let my end be like his or theirs.

He sees the people of God, he hears the word of God, he knows the people are blessed by God, that these are people who've got a future and a hope and he says I'd love to be part of it, I want to be part of it. But the last we see of Balaam is in number 13 verse 8 and he dies amongst the Midianites, God's enemies.

[25 : 42] And I suppose the warning is what Jude gives us. Because Jude tells us don't rush into the era of Balaam. And so here we are in church, maybe you've been a Christian for many years, or you've been coming here for many years, and the word of God is preached and held up as God's infallible rule for faith and conduct.

You've got a Bible in your home, you've probably got loads of Bibles in your home. You've got access to them. And it is possible, isn't it sadly, to be in the midst of a church like this, a fellowship where the Bible is opened and read and to be biblically literate and to know the truths of the Bible and yet not to embrace those truths for yourselves.

And that's the tragedy of many children and young people in churches, but also of adults. And that's the mistake that Balaam made. And the New Testament pleads with you not to make the mistake of Balaam.

Everyone wants to go to heaven, don't they? You want to go to heaven. You need to do this question as, you ask the question as, do you want to go to heaven? The answer is always yes. But if you want to go to heaven, you've got to be right with God.

And the only place to be right with God is by coming to Jesus and by confessing your sins and by allowing him to be your substitute. to allow him to take the curse in your place so that you might be blessed.

[27 : 06] Balaam was prepared to sacrifice eternal reward for short-term gain. And you can make the same mistake.

And instead of trusting Jesus and looking to Jesus and believing his word, you can look elsewhere for short-term gains for your security and happiness.

ending ending