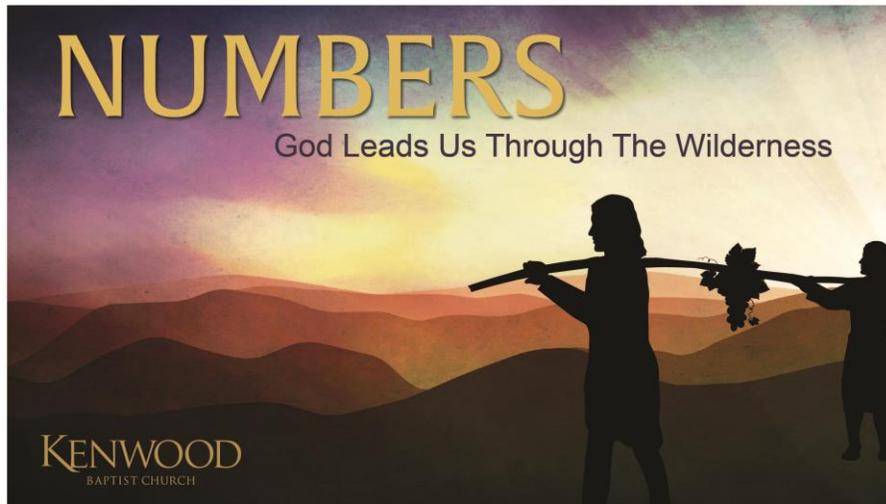


God Calls Us to Claim His Promise

Fall Sermon Series on Numbers
Kenwood Baptist Church
Pastor David Palmer
October 30, 2016

TEXT: Numbers 22:1-6; 23:1-12

I am really excited about this passage this morning. When we were planning out the fall series



on Numbers, I noted that it would be right before Halloween when we hit this narrative. It's just perfect timing that it is at a moment in our society when we have a great fascination with evil and we kindle fear in the hearts of many. God has a very powerful word for us this morning about where

the real power in universe lies. It lies with Him, and it lies with His blessing over our lives. If you are just joining us this morning, we are going through the Book of Numbers where God leads His people through the wilderness and commands blessing over us. We are about three quarters of the way through this series. We been following the of God's people being brought

out of Egypt, through the Sinai, up into the land of promise. In this portion of the Book of Numbers, when we reach Numbers 22, God's people have come over on the other side of the Jordan. They are encamped looking over the land of promise. They have come through the land of Moab, this vast multitude 600,000 people. As they come through the area of Moab, the king of Moab, Balak, whom we will meet in this text, panicked, and we will see his alarm, his concern. He hires out the best-



known prophet of the ancient world to bring doom upon God's people. It's a powerful portion of Scripture, so keep your Bible open to Numbers 22 and follow along this portion of God's

Word. It will take us in the end to a place that has very, very practical concrete application for us, because Numbers 22 through 24 really is a profound answer to many of the fears that lurk within us. We will see God's answer to that and that the resolution of our fears is His dwelling among us and His commitment to bless us.

We pick up the narrative in Numbers 22 when Balak, the king of Moab, sees this vast number of people. It's like having 600,000 people move through your backyard, and that causes great alarm. He is deeply concerned. He summons the elders of Midian, and he says in Numbers 22:4:

"This horde will now lick up all that is around us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field."

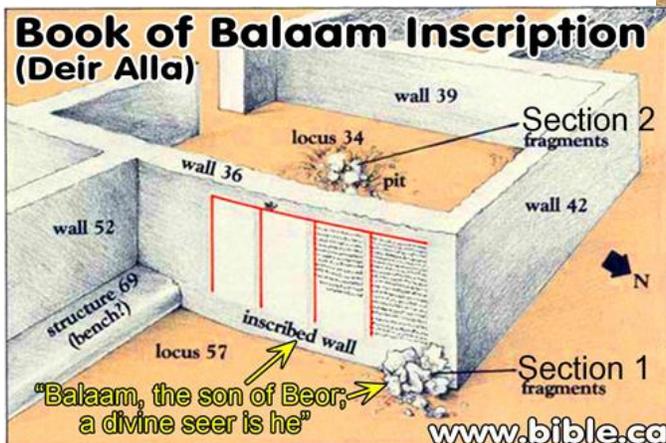
In other words, there are so many people in my backyard, nearby me, it is going to wreak havoc on my property. He is an ancient, self-interested king. So, Balak sends messengers to a certain Balaam, son of Beor, who lives near the river which is the Euphrates in the ancient world. He sends messengers from Moab all the way out to the Euphrates, which is a very long way away. He sends messengers with an invitation in Numbers 22:6:

"Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me."

He is hoping that he would be able to defeat them and drive them out of his way. He says in Numbers 22:6b:

"I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed."

Why would he send messengers all the way to the river Euphrates to bring this man, hire this man, to come in like an ancient hitman and take down God's people? The reason he does this is that Balaam is a professional. He is the most qualified. He has an eminent reputation of success. We knew this only from the Bible until 1967 when an archaeological team led by Dutch archaeologists were excavating across the Jordan in a city called *Deir Alla*.



They uncovered ruins of an ancient city, a temple compound, and as they excavated, the structures that they found had an inscription all along the walls, five large

panels. There had been an earthquake about 800 BC that made these panels drop and crumble, but they reconstructed 119 fragments of this inscription, and this inscription describes the work and fame of Balaam from our text. As they reconstructed this inscription, it tells that this sanctuary was built to honor Balaam. The text, and the major first section, describes Balaam, son of Beor, a diviner who saw visions of the gods, and in his visions, he saw that these other demonic powers, or competing gods, had planned calamity, and great disaster was coming against the city. So, the nobles of the city sought Balaam's help, and he uttered judgments, or curses, upon these other powers and rendered them ineffective. At the end of the day, blessing was secured, everyone lived happily ever after, the beautiful woman married the beautiful man, and the credits rolled up (That's the inscription portion that we don't have reconstructed). But the plot line is basically that there was terrible disaster, we didn't know what to do, so we paid Balaam a lot of money, and he silenced those powers and brought down curses on them and saved us all. And they built the sanctuary to remember him. This is exactly the area that the scriptural narrative is in. This Balaam, then, is brought, and he is offered large sums of money. You know, there's always travel expenses for these guys. They don't do this kind of work *pro bono*. There's no *pro bono* cursing in the ancient world! In Numbers 22:7, the elders of Moab, the elders of Midian, depart, and the text says:



"[They] departed with the fees for divination in their hand."

No one will ever offer to do this for free, and they depart and they give Balaam this message from Balak to come. They have this dialogue back and forth. Initially, Balaam says: "Well, you know, I'm not sure I can really come with you or not." Then Balak sends another round of ambassadors with the extra funds, more money, more offers of fame, and finally he says: "Okay, I'll go, but I can say only what the Lord puts in my mouth." He has this disclaimer, like the very fine print at the bottom of the contract.

Balaam goes, and on his way we have the narrative which were not talking about at length today, but it's the narrative where Balaam sets out, riding upon his donkey. There is a certain irony in this in this portion of the story. Balaam, who is a professional diviner, the one who is supposed to be able to see everything, is supposed to be able to command all these powers, is riding on his donkey, and as he's riding on the donkey, the Angel of the Lord stops in the road, and the donkey sees the Angel and goes off of the road. Balaam beats his donkey. He continues back on the path, and then the Angel of the Lord stands in a narrow place as Balaam enters into a path between vineyards, and there is a stone wall on either side. The donkey sees the Angel,

but Balaam doesn't. The donkey is trying to get around the Angel of the Lord because the Lord has a huge sword, just like at the Garden of Eden. Balaam gets irritated; his foot gets pressed against the wall; he beats the donkey again. Finally, they get into a very narrow place, and the Angel of the Lord blocks the way. The donkey sees it; Balaam doesn't. The donkey just sits down, and Balaam strikes the donkey repeatedly. Then we read in the Scripture with great humor that God gives the donkey the ability to speak. The donkey turns around to Balaam and says in Numbers 22:28:

"What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?"

Scholars throughout the centuries have wrestled with this. Just to be absolutely clear, ancient Israelites knew that animals can't speak, just as modern people do. Throughout the history of interpretation, some have imagined, like Maimonides, that this is a vision. That is not our burden this morning, but what is important to notice is the humor and the irony that this expert can't see the Angel of the Lord, but the animal does. Nevertheless, he arrives on the scene. The king of Moab rushes to the very borders of his property to meet up with Balaam. We read in Numbers 22:36:

"When Balak heard that Balaam had come, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, on the border formed by the Arnon, at the extremity of the border."

And he says in Numbers 22:37:

"Did I not send to you to call you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honor you?"

What took you so long? So Balak takes Balaam, and he brings him up after sacrifice and feasting, and in Numbers 22:41 we read:

"And in the morning Balak took Balaam and brought him up to Bamoth-baal, and from there he saw a fraction of the people."

He takes him to the high places of Baal, and there on the high places and he looks down over the valley and he sees just a fraction of the people. This is approximately Balaam's view at this moment. He is up on the elevated hills of Moab, looking down over the Jordan Valley, and there he sees just a fraction of the 600,000 families that have come out by God's mighty outstretched arm. Balaam says to Balak: "Let's get everything ready. He says in Numbers 23:1:



"Build for me here seven altars, and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams."

He prepares the scene. Animals are offered on each altar. He tells Balak in Numbers 23:3:

“Stand beside your burnt offering, and I will go. Perhaps the LORD will come to meet me, and whatever he shows me I will tell you.”

He goes up alone, and he returns with a word from the Lord in his mouth. He finds Balak and all the princes of Moab standing beside the offering. Everything is set. They are ready to bring down the judgment; they can't wait to divide the spoils. Balaam stands with great ceremony in front of the king of Moab and all the elders. Remember, they are the ones paying him. He reaches out his hands. He is ready to bring down the curses; he picks up his discourse, and he speaks in elevated poetry. He begins in Numbers 23:7:

“From Aram Balak has brought me, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains:”

This is a great beginning, isn't it? He goes on:

“Come, curse Jacob for me, and come, denounce Israel!”

We see the stylistic poetry of the ancient near East which often has these parallel phrases: line A, line B. Everything looks good from the beginning. The king of Moab is ready. Bring it down, here we go! And all the sudden he says in Numbers 23:8:

“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!”

There is an awkward silence among the king of Moab and his courtiers as Balaam looks out, speaks what is given to him, and proclaims the great truths of Scripture. This man was hired at great sums to come and bring curse and judgment, instead he unfolds the counsel of the Lord God Almighty and says that God's people will dwell separate. In other words, they are holy. He sees a holy people. They are not reckoned like all the other nations. He describes the language that is used in Exodus of God's people: redeemed, saved, set apart, holy to the Lord. Then he says in Numbers 23:10:

“Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel?”

They are so numerous, who can count them? This recalls of language and promises of Genesis and Exodus 1. Then Balaam seems to see the future for a moment and he says in Numbers 23:10b:

“Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his!”

I'd like to die how they are going to die. I would like my portion to be like theirs. We have these great truths of Scripture: God's blessing; you should be fruitful and multiply; a holy people; and

a promised future. And Balak says in Numbers 23:11:

“What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have done nothing but bless them.”

Then Balak says in Numbers 23:13:

“Please come with me to another place, from which you may see them. You shall see only a fraction of them and shall not see them all. Then curse them for me from there.”

So, Balak takes him over to the other side, to another elevated place, maybe the other side of the encampment of the 600,000 people. He takes them up to the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah. Again, they build seven altars and offer the sacrifices, and the Lord puts a word in Balaam’s mouth. He comes back to speak, and he finds again the king of Moab and the princes are ready, and Balaam takes up his discourse again. I imagine him with his divination robes, the accoutrements of trying to manipulate demonic power, has blood on his hands. He's ready to go. He's ready to bring down the fire, and they are ready. The first one was like a dud. Okay, here comes the real blow. Bring it down. We’re ready. He starts again with great promise in Numbers 23:18:

“Rise, Balak, and hear; give ear to me, O son of Zippor:”

So they think: “Here it comes. Bring down the heat.” And then Balaam says in Numbers 23:18b-22:

“God is not 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? Or has he spoken, and will He not fulfill it? Behold, I received a command to bless: He has blessed, and I cannot revoke it. He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob, nor has He seen trouble in Israel. The LORD their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them. God brings them out of Egypt and is for them like the horns of the wild ox.”

God is not a liar. He has not said, “I will bless you” and revoked it. God is not for you today and against you tomorrow. His plans and purposes cannot be thwarted. The Lord dwells among His people. There's no power of incantations, no curse, no judgment, that can be rendered against them. Balak is distraught at round two, and he says in Numbers 23:25:

“Do not curse them at all, and do not bless them at all.”

“Didn’t I tell you I hired you come and do this? Okay, let’s do round three.” Balak says to Balaam in Numbers 23:27:

“Come now, I will take you to another place. Perhaps it will please God that you may curse them for me from there.”

So he takes Balaam up to the top of the Peor and overlooks the wilderness. Israel is in the

wilderness, in the valley, and again seven altars are set up. The preparations are made. Balaam sets his face and looks towards the wilderness where he sees the people, and by God's sovereignty and power, as Balaam, this pagan diviner, is staring down, the Spirit of the living God gives him a word. Do you have faith that's big enough that you believe that the Spirit of God can say to even a pagan diviner: "I will speak a word blessing through you"?

Balaam positions himself again. He is ready. Maybe Balak's confidence is down, but at least there's a third attempt. The elders of Midian, the princes of Moab, are ready. Balak has taken his position. They are ready for round three. Balaam gets ready to announce it again, and he says in Numbers 24:3-4:

"The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is opened, the oracle of him who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down with his eyes uncovered:"

He is ready to speak. Here comes the judgment. We're ready. Bring it down. And then he says in Numbers 24:5:

"How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel!"

Balak is thinking at this point: "Who recommended this guy? Did you guys check his references? How much did we say we were going to pay?" And Balaam keeps going in Numbers 24:6-7:

"Like palm groves that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like aloes that the LORD has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters. Water shall flow from his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters; his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted."

Remember, Balak was so concerned about this ox imagery. He compared Israel to an ox that is going to eat up all my property and take up my backyard. And Balaam says in Numbers 24:8:

"God brings him out of Egypt and is for him like the horns of the wild ox."

With all due reverence, you have a 'wild ox' on your side. It is the Lord God Almighty, and no matter what the size, shape, scale, threatening presence of your adversaries, there is none like the Lord who has taken His stand with you.

Balaam finishes and says in Numbers 24:9:

"Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you."

When the king of Moab hears this blessing, he becomes furious, he slaps his hands together, and he says in Numbers 24:10:

"I called you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have blessed them these three times."

Therefore now flee to your own place. I said, 'I will certainly honor you,' but the LORD has held you back from honor."

Balak says: "I'm not going to fulfill my end of the contract. I'm reneging. I said I would honor you, but you have forfeited this honor. We are not paying a dime. I hired you to curse and you have only blessed." Balaam looks at him as a leitmotif throughout these chapters, and says in Numbers 24:13:

"What the LORD speaks, that will I speak."

Then Balaam looks at Balak and says: "I have one more thing to say." Then he looks out and he says in Numbers 24:14:

"And now, behold, I am going to my people. Come, I will let you know what this people will do to your people in the latter days."

This is an unsolicited bonus-round, and God gives this famous, pagan diviner a vision that we are going to explore in more detail in a few weeks. He gives him a vision of the Messiah rising to rule over all the nations, and Balak says: "Get out of here!"

What is the force of this passage, this moment, for the people of God? This morning I want to feed your soul as I have been fed this week from this passage. As I've poured over these verses, read with great care these narratives, it is so powerful to remember that all of this is happening up on the hillside while God's people are in the valley. They have no idea that this is happening. I spent three quarters of this week looking through this text and imagining that all this was happening on the mountaintops, and then I realized where we are. We are in the valley. We have no idea that this professional diviner has been hired to rain down curses and judgment. We are still panicked, slightly nervous and unsure. We are at the edge, now looking over Jericho. All that God has promised is right across the street. Is He with us? Is He going to carry through His promises? I'm not sure. What do you think? Can He do it? What should we do? This is happening, and you know, there is a spiritual reality that is happening around us that sometimes we do not see. We see in this text: the power, the divine power, of an irrevocable blessing. There is no power to bring down a curse, and in light of this, we must teach our souls, now in the valley, that whatever is right in front of you, you must teach your soul to say: "I am blessed. I am blessed." When we are in those valleys, when we see danger in front of us, danger behind, we hear reports about giants in the land, we often feel great fear. When we are hungry, when we are thirsty, when the quail has run out, we become very vulnerable to self-pity in the valley. When you're in that valley, and you feel fear of man, or you feel self-pity, you feel like: "Let me find comfort and indulge myself in this or that in earthly pleasure." We often, even at this time of year, have a strange fascination with evil things, and yet the force of this narrative is the power of God's irrevocable blessing, that there is no evil against you that can prosper.

Remember Balak's charge to Balaam. He said that the one that you bless is blessed and the one you curse is cursed. This is not true. True blessing comes rushing forth from the Lord. Balaam himself says: *"I received a command to bless. God has blessed, and I cannot revoke it."*

The Lord God Almighty speaks blessing over us this morning. The scriptural refrain, Old and New Testament, is a blessing that cannot be revoked. Deuteronomy 28:12:

"Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people whom He has chosen as His heritage!"

In Psalm 40:4, we read:

"Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust, who does not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after a lie!"

Psalm 84:4-7 reads:

"Blessed are those who dwell in Your house, ever singing Your praise! Blessed are those whose strength is in You, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. As they go through the Valley of Baca [Sorrow] they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools. They go from strength to strength; each one appears before God in Zion."

Jeremiah 17:7-8 says:

"Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit."

This irrevocable blessing that God has pronounced all the way back in Genesis is yours in Christ. Remember Genesis 12:1-3 when the Lord appeared to Abram. He said:

"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And 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."

This morning, this blessing of Abraham is yours. It is mine in Jesus Christ. Paul says in Galatians 3:14:

"In Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith."

You are blessed this morning. You are blessed with an irrevocable blessing. It is a blessing that you don't deserve. Hallelujah! It is a blessing that I don't deserve. When you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you can fear no evil. Why? Because You were with me! That

makes all the difference. You are blessed with the presence and the power of the Lord God Almighty, who has done what you and I could never do, and that is to reach out His mighty outstretched arm and save you and me. He has made provision for the forgiveness of our sins. He has written in your name and my name as a co-heir with Jesus Christ of the new heavens and the new earth. We have election. We have redemption, and we have an inheritance together with Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.

You are blessed, and this blessing cannot be taken away. No one can be hired to take it away from you. No professional marketing firm can be hired to bring you just a perfectly-designed product to take your eyes off Jesus Christ. No amount of cookies can be attached to your personal browsing history to customize a distraction perfectly suited for you to take your eyes off the living God. You are blessed with an irrevocable blessing, so you must teach your soul to say, "I am blessed." When you say "I am blessed," be prepared. You can use the oracles of Balaam as a quick summary of your blessings: "I am blessed, the shout of a King is with me." "I am blessed, I have one more powerful than a wild ox on my side." When you are tempted with self-pity, when you are tempted to be fearful of the circumstances of this world. When you are tempted to think the real power in the universe resides with my supervisor and his or her decision is the determining factor of my promotion or not, say, "I have a wild ox on my side." The Lord God Almighty has spoken a word of blessing. Do you believe that? Do you believe that even this professional diviner, brought all the way from the Euphrates and given all perfect access, a box view, is thwarted and can pour forth only a torrent of blessing? It's irrevocable. It's undeserved. It's not earned. It's a gift, and it's given to all who have placed their trust in Jesus Christ. Paul says in Ephesians 1:3-4; 7; 11:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him."

That's Balaam's Oracle #1

"In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace."

That's Balaam's Oracle #2

"In Him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will."

That's Balaam's Oracle #3

You are blessed, and I want to challenge you this week, very specifically, to wake up in the morning, and before your feet hit the ground, say: "I am blessed with an irrevocable blessing.

It's a blessing I don't deserve. It's a blessing that can't be thwarted. It can't be taken away. It's a blessing that has come to me through God's redemptive plan—to reach out His arm to make provision for the forgiveness of my sins, to claim me for Himself that I would be a people holy to God, a people who have the forgiveness of sins, a people who have a past, who have a present, who have a future that is being worked out, that God is for me, that He is not against me.” Fill up your soul with this blessing before your feet touch the ground. It would be mighty strange, but beautiful, to use Balaam’s oracles as a devotional river of blessing.

It’s true, and when your soul is saturated with blessing, this irrevocable, undeserved blessing, there are two other things that happen as a result of being saturated like a sponge with this blessing of God.

The first thing that happens is that you are protected from the temptations of this valley. The people in Numbers 25 didn’t know this was happening, and they are tempted to seek comfort for themselves, to alleviate their fears, and they sin in the valley, even while this is happening. But when you're saturated with blessing, it's like being vaccinated against temptation.

The second thing that happens to you, will happen to all of us, is that the Scripture teaches that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks, and if you are saturated with the blessing, this an irrevocable blessing. That means that you will speak blessing into the lives that are around you. Oh, how powerful it is when parents speak words of blessing to their children. Oh, how powerful it is when husbands speak words of blessing to their wives. Oh, how powerful it is when colleagues speak words of blessing in the workplace. Oh, how powerful it is when you speak blessing to those who may be coming through on the sidewalks of your neighborhood. This week, speak a word of blessing, because it's a blessing that you have received, and it is irrevocable. It is a gift from the Lord God Almighty. Let’s pray.

Oh Lord, we thank You for the riveting narrative of Numbers 22-24. We thank You, Lord, that no weapon that's formed against us can stand. We thank You, Lord, that we have received a blessing, and that You are for us and not against us. I pray, Father, this morning, that You would allow us to see this blessing and experience it. Father, if there are just one or two here this morning who stand apart from Christ, I pray that they would receive Him now, just open their heart and say, “Jesus, I need Your forgiveness, and I seek Your blessing.” Lord, for all of us who have received You by faith, I pray that You would saturate our soul this week with Your blessing, that You would protect us from the temptations of this world, and that You would speak forth blessing from us to those around us. Father, before our feet hit the ground in the mornings of this week, would we have courage and faithfulness to remind ourselves: “I am blessed. I am blessed by the Lord God Almighty, who has saved me, who has forgiven me, who has redeemed my past, who is empowering my present and leading me into a glorious future with Him.