

Teachings from Balaam

Passages: Num 22–25:3

Memory Verse

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” (Matthew 6:24)

Knowledge of God’s Will [God’s Word]	Knowledge of God [God’s Divine Nature]	Good Works [Behavior]
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. God has the power to dictate the events of history.2. He is able to use anyone, even Gentiles, for His purpose.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. God desires to bless His people.2. No desire of God’s can be withheld from Him.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Remember that with God on our side, nothing can stand in our way.2. Understand the blinding power of pride and greed.3. Learn to serve God with a pure heart.

Overview

Events and Spiritual Teachings

- A. Who Was Balaam?
- B. Balak Sends for Balaam
- C. Balaam, the Donkey, and the Angel
- D. God Blesses the Israelites Through Balaam

Life Application

1. The Hidden Power of God in History
2. The Blinding Power of Pride and Greed
3. Serving God with a Pure Heart

Memory Verse

Conclusion: We must remember to remove any pride or greed in our hearts so that we do not cause conflict with others. Instead, we must fill our hearts with God’s purpose and His will so that we can serve Him with a pure heart.

Spiritual Teachings

Introduction

Throughout history, God often used Gentiles—entire nations and single individuals alike—to punish and help His chosen people, and to fulfill His messages and purpose. This proves that all things are under God’s control; He can dictate and orchestrate the unfolding events of history in accordance with His will. God has the power to use anyone and everyone for His purpose—even people who do not know Him, worship Him, or believe in Him. Balaam was one such person.

A. Who Was Balaam?

A false prophet who led the children of Israel astray, Balaam received several mentions in the New Testament. Let’s turn to Revelation 2:14. In this passage, the Lord is speaking to the church at Pergamos. He said, “But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.” Clearly, Balaam was instrumental in making the Israelites sin against God.

Peter described false prophets as “spots and blemishes, carousing in their own deceptions while they feast with you” (2 Pet 2:13) and added that they follow “the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness” (v. 15). Jude also accused false teachers of being like Balaam in that they were entirely motivated by their greed (Jude 11). Balaam enjoyed the riches and honor that he received for his works of divination. He was a man who served only his own interests and, as a result, had no qualms about destroying the faith of the Israelites in order to reach his own goals.

Before this event, however, Balaam had a direct experience with God Himself. Although he was a sinner who didn’t truly worship God, Balaam served as His messenger in one incident when the Moabite king Balak wanted to curse the Israelites.

B. Balak Sends for Balaam (Num 22:1–21)

While Israel was passing by Moab, Balak was very afraid because there were so many of them, and they had settled nearby. So, he sent for Balaam, seeking divine intervention. He wanted Balaam to curse the Israelites, so that he could drive them out of the land. Let’s read Numbers 22:1–14.

“Divination” refers to the pagan practice of predicting the future through different methods, such as consulting with the dead or divining through animals. A common practice of the time was ritually sacrificing an animal, and then “reading” signs from the gods on its liver. A modern equivalent of divination today might be horoscopes or palm readings. In biblical times, pagan prophets were believed to be able to influence the gods, and Balaam was a particularly famous prophet (Num 22:6) with a well-known reputation. However, although Balaam seemed to speak familiarly with the Lord, he was still a pagan diviner, an idolater, and an enemy of God (Deut 18:10–14).

Let’s continue by reading verses 15–19. Despite Balaam’s words, Balak sent even more people and greater bribes in an attempt to persuade him. From this, we can see that Balak didn’t take Balaam’s original response seriously. By saying, “Please let nothing hinder you from coming to me,” Balak was pleading for Balaam to ignore God’s explicit instructions.

Satan uses many different tactics to make us susceptible to sin. He will often try to arouse our pride, our desires, or even our sympathies to lure us away from God’s commands. In Balaam’s case, he was lured

by flattery and greed. Balaam's heart was already set on the riches that were offered to him (Ezek 14:3). He may have inquired of God, but his inquiry was meaningless because he already knew the answer that he wanted. As a result, although Balaam's words were a picture of obedience, he was unwilling to obey in his heart. Let's read verses 20–21. The Lord instructed Balaam to go with them only if they called to him, but he ignored this condition and simply went in the morning.

Balak and Balaam's actions were those of people who did not respect God. Balak's insistence that Balaam come, and Balaam's desire for honor and rewards, showed that they were both self-serving people. Their words may have given different impressions, but their actions showed hearts that followed their own desires. From this, we can see that when someone's heart is set on sin, they will ignore anything that runs contrary to what they want.

C. Balaam, the Donkey, and the Angel (Num 22:22–34)

Because of Balaam's disobedience, God's anger was aroused against him. Let's continue with Numbers 22:22–27. Balaam may not have seen the Angel of the LORD, but it should have occurred to him that his donkey's actions signaled that he was taking the wrong path. His blindness was in part because of his resolution to disobey God's words. At no point did he stop to reconsider his actions, so there was no reason for him to think that his donkey's actions were a sign. Let's continue reading verses 28–30.

What God did next was a remarkable act of mercy. He was giving Balaam a chance to wake up from his errors. Yet when the donkey questioned why Balaam had struck her, Balaam's response was outrageous and almost comical. Outrageous because Balaam was the one who had inflicted all of the abuse in this situation. Comical because he did not stop to question: "How and why is this donkey speaking to me?" Because of his resolve to sin, his entire perception of the situation was clouded, and he reacted with absurd anger at the donkey's interference.

Let's continue reading verses 31–34. Balaam finally confessed that he had sinned, but his confession did not count for much because he only confessed when he was caught in the situation. He also added, "[For] I did not know You stood in the way against me. Now therefore, if it displeases You, I will turn back." These are not the words of a repentant person. These are the words of someone trying to push his luck. With an Angel of the LORD literally standing in his way, it was clear that Balaam's actions displeased God. But he still tried to get his way with words that seemed submissive but were in fact rebellious.

Sometimes, it is obvious when we are about to act against God's will. But we still like to justify our actions with all sorts of excuses. "It's only a small fib;" "We're only holding hands;" "I'm only taking a little;" or "My parents won't even notice." There are so many ways that we try to convince ourselves that it is okay to be doing what we shouldn't be. Balaam teaches us that it is easy to pretend to repent, but our deeds reflect our true heart. If we are constantly pushing the boundaries of God's laws, then there is a problem with our relationship with God. If we truly loved Him, then we would genuinely want to please Him from our hearts and would avoid risking our eternal lives for the sake of our physical desires.

D. God Blesses the Israelites Through Balaam (Num 22:35–24:24)

Let's continue with the story and read Numbers 22:35–41. The Lord eventually allowed Balaam to meet with Balak, under the condition that Balaam only speak the words that God spoke to him. Balaam, however, greeted Balak with the words, "Look, I have come to you!" It would have been more accurate

to say that he arrived only because God permitted him to. Instead, Balaam's words implied that he had personally granted Balak's request.

The offerings that Balak made were pagan sacrifices to idols. Although Balaam was supposed to be speaking on behalf of the one true God, Balaam still took part in idolatry. He may have served as God's messenger in this short period of time, but he did not belong to God. From this, we can see an important lesson: people who serve the Lord do not necessarily have a close relationship with Him.

1. The first blessing: Israel has been chosen by God (Num 23:1–12)

The message that Balaam gave to Balak was clear: he could not curse whom God had not cursed or denounce whom God had not denounced (Num 23:8). He also blessed Israel, saying, "There! A people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations. Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number one-fourth of Israel?" (vv. 9–10). The Israelites had been set apart by God and blessed so much that their numbers couldn't be counted.

2. The second blessing: God's blessing cannot be removed (Num 23:13–26)

After the first prophecy, Balak foolishly thought that going to another location could influence the Lord to curse, instead of bless, the Israelites. Naturally, this did not work. No matter where they stood or whatever rituals they performed, God is truth. The Lord emphasized this by proclaiming His message directly to Balak this time: "God is not a man, that He should lie. [...] Has He said, and will He not do?" (Num 23:19). God's blessings for Israel can never be removed no matter how many times those against them may attempt to subvert the Lord. There is no force stronger than God's will, and His will was to let Israel rise "like a lioness, and [lift] itself up like a lion" (v. 24).

3. The third blessing: The strength of Israel (Num 24:1–13)

The third time, Balaam finally realized that there was no purpose in using his sorcery. He set his face towards Israel and this time, "the Spirit of God came upon him." No matter what Balaam or Balak did, God was going to bless His people, even to the point of using an enemy to do so. This time, Balaam described the Israelites as a prosperous nation, whose "king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted." (Num 24:7). Their enemies would be overpowered with God's strength; those who bless Israel will be blessed, while those who curse them will be cursed (vv. 8–9).

4. The fourth blessing: The coming Messiah from Israel (Num 24:14–19)

Balak became extremely angry when Balaam blessed Israel for a third time. Balaam's divinations may have gone according to man's will in the past, but this time, God would not let him curse His nation. And on the heels of Balak's anger, God gave Balaam a fourth prophecy. This time, Balaam saw a vision of the One who would ultimately bring down the many nations of sinners, including the Moabites. He prophesied the coming of Jesus Christ out of the Israelites (Num 24:17).

5. The last prophecies: Judgment against the Gentile nations (Num 24:20–24)

The last words the Lord had Balaam speak were against the enemies of Israel. God's power was not limited to that of the Israelites. He was able to influence the future of all the nations of the world, including the Moabites themselves. Just as there was no way to avert God's blessings, there was also no escaping God's judgment.

Like Balaam's anger at the donkey, Balak was so intent on cursing the Israelites that he was unable to see God's prevailing power clearly. As a result, he wrongfully accused Balaam of deliberately going against Balak's wishes and sabotaging his own reward, despite Balaam repeatedly telling him, "All that the Lord speaks, that I must do" (Num 22:38; 23:12, 26; 24:13). Balak simply could not accept that, unlike their false idols, he could not bend the true God to his own will.

Despite the way God made meaningless their pagan rituals, the Moabite king still did not respect or accept His power and protection of the Israelite people. Balak should have seen the fact that he could not turn the Lord's blessing into a curse. Unlike the pagan gods that they worshipped, the Lord cannot be forced to yield to mankind's will.

Check for Understanding

- 1. How do Peter and Jude describe false prophets?** As people who love the wages of unrighteousness, and who are entirely motivated by their greed.
- 2. When Balak told Balaam, "Please let nothing hinder you from coming to me," what was he truly asking Balaam?** He was asking Balaam to ignore God's explicit instructions.
- 3. Though Balaam repeatedly told Balak and the princes that he could only act according to the Lord's will, how do we know that Balaam was not truly God's servant?** Despite his words, Balaam disobeyed God and followed the princes, admitted his sin when he was cornered but did not truly repent, and still tried to push God's limits by attempting to continue onwards.
- 4. Although Balaam was supposed to be speaking on behalf of the one true God, he still took part in idolatry. What lesson does this teach us?** People who serve the Lord do not necessarily have a close relationship with Him.

Life Application

1. The Hidden Power of God in History

From the story of Balaam, we can see that no matter how we may struggle to change or twist the situation, if the Lord wills something to happen, it will happen. Just as with the Israelites, if God wants us to be blessed, we will be blessed, no matter what anyone else says or does to us. We can rely on God's power to take care of us, as everything is under His control. In addition to Balaam, another example of God's power over history can be found in the life of Joseph. He was sold into slavery and imprisoned for years, but, ultimately, the unfortunate events allowed him to save his family from a severe famine. From both stories, we can see that God often uses the wickedness in human hearts to serve His own purpose.

There will be times when we experience hard times in our lives. During those times, we may often feel as if nothing is going right. Our application didn't go through; we couldn't get into the club or course that we wanted; or we simply couldn't do well on the test even though we studied so hard. It is easy to feel like the entire world is against us, and we might even start to question if God is truly taking care of us! But during those times, we need to remember that all things are under God's control.

Let's turn to Romans 8:28, 31, and take a moment to write these verses down in our notebooks:

"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?"

Nothing can stand in our way if God is on our side! He is the almighty God who can change the entire course of history if He wants to. Knowing this, we can be assured that no matter what troubles we are facing, at the end of the day, it's still all in God's control. We just need to learn to be patient and trust in His guidance.

2. The Blinding Power of Pride and Greed

One characteristic that Balaam and Balak shared was the way they both lashed out at others when angry. Balaam, enraged at his donkey's seeming disobedience, struck her three times. Balak, despite being told repeatedly that Balaam was only speaking what the Lord told him, became incredibly angry at Balaam when he was unable to curse the Israelites. This is because both Balaam and Balak were full of pride and greed—Balaam, for riches and honor, and Balak, for a way to rid himself of the Israelites. When we are full of pride, ambition, or desire, we strike out at others, especially when we don't get our way.

The Bible constantly warns us against pride and greed. It teaches us that pride causes nothing but strife (Prov 13:10; cf. Jas 4:1), and Jesus describes pride and covetousness as "evil things [that] come from within and defile a man" (Mk 7:22–23). This is because someone whose heart is full of pride or greed is entirely focused on themselves. Their hearts have no room for anyone else, much less for God. As a result, they will never be able to live in peace and harmony as God desires of us, and they will never be able to draw close enough to God to receive His blessings.

It is sometimes our instinct to lash out or to blame someone when we experience obstacles or difficulties. If we find ourselves doing this, then we need to examine ourselves. Are we constantly getting into arguments? Are we unable to let go and forgive others? Perhaps we are so set on earning money for a specific purchase that we have forgotten that we meant to spend it on a parent's birthday present. Maybe we were so focused on achieving something for ourselves that we didn't notice when we hurt a friend's feelings. All of these are signs of pride and greed in our hearts.

Take a moment to reflect on yourself and identify a recent time you were proud or greedy for something. Perhaps you were set on winning an argument, coveted something that your friends had, or treated your parents harshly for not buying or doing something that you wanted. Share this with a partner or a group and discuss how you can approach a similar situation in the future. Then, write down at least two verses that will remind you to be humble, to avoid conflict, and to seek out the riches not of this world, but of the kingdom of heaven (*Ex: Mt 6:24, 33; 18:4; Rom 12:16; Jas 4:6*).

3. Serving God with a Pure Heart

People are generally motivated entirely by self-interest. We don't like to act without receiving something in exchange, or unless we see some sort of benefit for ourselves. It is human nature to act on our own interests, but not the interests of others. If we were to look at Balaam's words alone, we might think that he was acting as God's servant. He asked for the Lord's instruction when Balak sent for him, and told them repeatedly that he could only do what the Lord told him. But Balaam's actions told us his true motives: he ignored the Lord's instructions by following the princes anyway, repented of his sin only when trapped in a corner, and then pushed to continue despite the angel blocking his way.

a. Exposing Our True Motives

How many times have we said one thing, but meant another? It is easy to convey an impression of obedience to God, but our actions will tell the truth of our hearts. Do we greet our elders politely, only to cut in front of them in the lunch line? Do we laugh and joke with a brother or

sister in church, only to not bother caring for them when they are in trouble or in need? Perhaps we have offered to help cook, but only because we do not want to spend time with God in service.

All of these are examples of someone whose heart is not truly with God. It is very easy for us to hide our motives behind a smiling mask and nice words like Balaam, but God knows the truth of our hearts. Knowing this, we must constantly examine our own hearts. What are our motives when we act? Are we acting out of love for God and for our brethren, or do we normally make decisions out of self-interest?

b. Serving God's Purpose

Another lesson that we can learn from Balaam is the fact that God can and will use anyone for His purpose, regardless of their hidden motives. Sometimes, Christians feel secure in their spirituality because of the amount of work that they do for the church. However, as evidenced by Balaam, being used by the Lord does not guarantee that we have a good relationship with Him.

Knowing this, we must be careful of our spirituality. Ask yourself: do I serve God out of a desire to draw closer to Him, and for the sake of His will? Or do I only serve for self-satisfaction? We must never become proud of what we have accomplished for God, because He can use anyone for His will. Instead, we must humbly give thanks for the opportunities that He gives us and serve with clean hands and a pure heart.

Let's look at a few Bible verses about how to serve God with a pure heart. For each verse, highlight or underline the word "pure," or the words related to purity. Then, for each verse, discuss as a group: according to this verse, what action do I need to take in order to have a clean and pure heart?

- Psalm 24:3–4: "Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, nor sworn deceitfully."
- 1 Peter 1:22: "Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart[.]"
- 2 Timothy 2:22: "Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart."
- Psalm 51:10: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."
- 1 John 3:3: "And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure."

Memory Verse

"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." (Matthew 6:24)

Meaning

In this verse, Jesus is teaching us that we must be loyal to God with all our heart. This means keeping ourselves from serving another god in our hearts, minds, and actions. Even today, it is very common for people to be enslaved to the riches of the world, just like Balaam. Most people are driven to earn or spend money, so they focus little on anything else in their lives. But to follow this path is to follow the road to destruction.

We must be careful not to deceive ourselves into thinking that we have a good relationship with God, when in truth, we are serving other gods. Instead, take the time to examine our lifestyle. Do we make decisions based on God's will? Or do we make decisions based on our physical desires, whether they are for wealth, social standing, or other riches? Whatever motivates our actions is what our hearts truly value.

Conclusion

From today's story, we can see that God's will cannot be averted. He can and will use anyone for His purpose, even a sinner. Balaam's story serves as a warning to those of us in the church. Knowing God, or even having spiritual experiences with Him, does not equate to being close to God. He can achieve His purposes through us but being used by Him does not guarantee that we have a good relationship with Him. We must remember to remove any pride or greed in our hearts so that we do not cause conflict with others, and instead, fill our hearts with God's purpose and His will so that we can serve Him with a pure heart.

Lesson 6 Homework Assignment Answer Key

1. What does the memory verse teach us about our hearts and serving God?
We must be loyal to God with all our heart. This means keeping ourselves from serving another god in our hearts, minds, and actions. We must be careful not to deceive ourselves into thinking that we have a good relationship with God, when in truth, we are serving other gods.
2. “They have _____ the _____ way and gone _____, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who _____ the _____ of _____.” (2 Peter 2:15)
forsaken, right, astray, loved, wages, unrighteousness
3. What do Balak and Balaam teach us about a heart that is set on its own desires?
When someone’s heart is set on sin, they will ignore anything that runs contrary to what they want. If we truly loved God, then we would genuinely want to please Him, rather than try to push the boundaries of sin.
4. Balaam served as God’s messenger, but he did not belong to God. What can we learn from this?
Those who serve the Lord do not necessarily have a close relationship with Him.
5. Why do pride and greed blind us spiritually?
Someone whose heart is full of pride or greed is entirely focused on themselves. Their hearts have no room for anyone else, much less for God.
6. Are there other things in your heart which push God out of your life? Explain.
Personal answers.