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Numbers 22-24

This week at Magalen Road we tackled the next section of Numbers and encountered a Moabite leader named Balak attempting to curse the people of Israel.

Numbers 22-24 is both a big chunk of text, but also relatively unknown so we spent the first 1/2 of the sermon re-telling the story and then the second 1/2 half attempting to understand what it means for us! Rather than focussing in on the fine detail for this re-cap we'll be brief and broad, then thinking through the implications and finally some questions.

Balak is rightly fearful as he knows both the size of the Israelites, but also their track records from previous chapters against the Amorites. The picture we get of Balak is of a powerful man who's used to getting what he wants. His tactic as he seeks to deal with the Israelites is not to use military might, but rather to curse them. To accomplish this, his plan is to hire a seemingly 'famous' local seer named Balaam.

He sends a delegate of officials to speak to Balaam who initially enquires of the Lord and is firmly told he may not curse them, because they are a blessed people. In fact that is a key drumbeat throughout the narrative - God has blessed his people and Balaam is simply unable to curse them as Balak desires.

However, after initially being given the red light after the first encounter with Balaks officials, upon a second attempt God surprisingly tells Balaam he may in fact go with them - yet again he is only able to say what God wants him to say. It may well be that the 'green light' from the Lord the second time is a way of God teaching Balaam that he must choose whom he fears (these men v9, or God). Balaam seems to be hoping God will change his mind (or at least let him profit in a monetary sense).



Soon after going with the officials back to Balak, Balaams way is blocked by the Angel of Lord. Again there is some doubt as to why as the Lord had just told him he could go with them. The best answer seems to be that Balaam has not been entirely upfront with them this time about him still not being able to curse Gods people. What is clear is that God both enables Balaams donkey to see the Angel and to speak and then he finally opens Balaams eyes to the situation. Where Balaam had threatened his disobedient donkey with death, so we too are to see a parallel with disobedient Balaam, greedily ignoring what God has told him. Indeed Balaam is painted throughout scripture as one who is double-minded and greedy - seeking to profit from Gods people.

When Balaam and Balak finally meet, as promised, Balaam is still only able to bless the people rather than curse them. Even with 3 lots of sacrifices in 3 different places (surprise surprise!) - Balaam can still not curse them. In fact he ends up speaking 7 oracles of blessing towards them - culminating in a future blessing that will see a king defeating all those who threaten the people of God.

We then considered what this (slightly unusual) story means for us!
We noted 2 key aspects and thought about how they apply:

1. how not to relate to the true God.

Balaks fundamental issue was a problem of not understanding who the real God is. In his mind if he had the most powerful prophet, making expensive sacrifices in the right place, then of course he will be the winner. His experience of localised so-called deities may have supported this. Fundamentally the issues comes down to a mindset of expensive idolatry and works. He just doesn't get it when Balaam is unable to curse them, so rather comically they try somewhere else for the alter and then even somewhere else!

The human heart veers towards a man-centred understanding of how to be right with God. Easily as Christians we can daily slide into the Balak trap of attempting to bargain with and control God - wrongly thinking that if we do the 'right things' God is bound to be on our side.

The second aspect we saw though is

2. how to relate to the true God.

The striking idea at the heart of these verses is that you cannot stop God from blessing his people. At the heart of the account is a kind, gracious and powerful God determined to bless!

Indeed as Balaams oracles go on we begin to see some very interesting themes developing culminating in the promise of a future King (note they didn't have any kings yet as they weren't in the land) - indeed 24v17 speaks of a star and sceptre which many have perhaps seen in mind at Christmas.

The encouragement for us as Gods people is that Gods King has come, we are blessed in Him and that blessing cannot be blocked. For many Christians that idea of God always blessing is an alien one as he's seen not as one always blessing, but rather always angry. However passages like this at helpful correctives - even in the midst of suffering and trials we can be confident that God cannot help but bless.

As always here some starting questions - feel free to adapt as appropriate (or write your own!).

Brainstorm Numbers so far... What are the key themes and ideas that have struck you? Have they made a difference at all in terms of daily life? (Be honest!)

Perhaps pick an oracle or two (of the longer ones) to focus on as a group and work out what they mean. What are the key ideas and elements? How does Balaam bless rather than curse?

What do you make of Balaam?

How does this account show us how not to relate to God? What does Balak do / believe that's wrong? (How) are we in danger of following suit?

What does this account teach us about God and his desire / promise to bless his people?

Do you believe that you cannot stop God blessing his people? What difference ought that make to your daily life?