

BALAAM'S TALKING ASS

THE ASS THAT TALKED What We Can Learn From a Donkey Numbers 22

"And the children of Israel set forward, and pitched in the plains of Moab, on this side Jordan by Jericho. And Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. And Moab was sore afraid of the people, because they were many: and Moab was distressed because of the children of Israel. And Moab said unto the elders of Midian, Now shall this company lick up all that are round about us, and the ox licketh up the grass of the field. And Balak the son of Zippor was king of the Moabites at that time.

"He sent messengers therefore unto Balaam the son of Beor to Pethor, which is by the river of the land of the children of his people, to call him, saying, Behold, there is a people come out from Egypt: behold, they cover the face of the Earth, and they abide over against me: Come now therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people; for they are too mighty for me: peradventure I shall prevail, that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land: for I know that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed.

"And the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the rewards of divination in their hand; and they came unto Balaam, and spake unto him the words of Balak. And he said unto them, Lodge here this night, and I will bring you word again, as the Lord shall speak unto me: and the princes of Moab abode with Balaam." Balak wanted Balaam to curse the children of Israel for money. And Balaam took this to the Lord and the Lord told Him not to curse His own people.

"And God said unto Balaam, Thou shalt not go with them; thou shalt not curse the people: for they are blessed." Don't go, don't curse them! Balaam told them what the Lord has said and they left and came back again

this time with more men. They promised Balaam more money and honor and told him he could have whatever he wanted if he would curse the children of Israel.

"And Balaam answered and said unto the servants of Balak, If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the Word of the Lord my God, to do less or more." Then God came to Balaam at night and said unto him, "if the men come to call thee, rise up and go with them, but yet the Word which I shall say unto thee, that shall thou do." Go, but don't curse Israel.

Balaam rose up in the morning and **saddled his ass** and went with the princes of Moab. "And God's anger was kindled because he went: and the Angel of the Lord stood in the way for an adversary against him. Now he was riding upon his ass, and his two servants were with him. And the ass saw the Angel of the Lord standing in the way, and His sword drawn in His hand: and the ass turned aside out of the way, and went into the field: and Balaam smote the ass, to turn her into the way. But the Angel of the Lord stood in a path of the vineyards, a wall being on this side, and a wall on that side.

"And when the ass saw the Angel of the Lord, she thrust herself unto the wall, and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall: and he smote her again. And the Angel of the Lord went further, and stood in a narrow place, where was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left. And when the ass saw the Angel of the Lord, she fell down under Balaam: and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he smote the ass with a staff.

"And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me

these three times? And Balaam said unto the ass, Because thou hast mocked me: I would there were a sword in mine hand, for now would I kill thee. And the ass said unto Balaam, Am not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden ever since I was thine unto this day? was I ever wont to do so unto thee? And he said, Nay.

"Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the Angel of the Lord standing in the way, and His sword drawn in His hand: and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face. And the Angel of the Lord said unto him, Wherefore hast thou smitten thine ass these three times? behold, I went out to withstand thee, because thy way is perverse before Me: And the ass saw Me, and turned from Me these three times: unless she had turned from Me, surely now also I had slain thee, and saved her alive.

"And Balaam said unto the Angel of the Lord, I have sinned; for I knew not that Thou stoodest in the way against me: now therefore, if it displease Thee, I will get me back again. And the Angel of the Lord said unto Balaam, Go with the men: but only the Word that I shall speak unto thee, that thou shalt speak." So Balaam went with the princes of Balak.

"And Balaam said unto Balak, Lo, I am come unto thee: have I now any power at all to say any thing? the Word that God putteth in my mouth, that shall I speak."

What we learn from this talking ass is this:

First, how much knowledge and love of good there may be in a bad man. Balaam was a prophet. He knew something about the character of the Lord. He knew what righteousness meant. He knew of a future state and longed for "the last end of the righteous." **He would not break the Word of God, the Law of God, and curse by word of mouth.** But yet for all that, he wanted still to curse because of the money that was offered him. He wanted to do the wrong thing, and that made him evil. When he could not do it one way, he did it another way.

So, he is a picture for us of the universal blending and mixture that there is even in bad men. It is not knowledge that makes a man good. It is not aspirations after righteousness. These dwell more or less in all souls. It is not desire "to go to Heaven," salvation. Everyone has that desire. Perfectly vicious men are demons. There is always the blending.

Many of us are trusting to these same vagrant wishes, but it is not what man would sometimes like, but what the whole set and tenor of his life tends towards, that makes him. It is not just a one shot decision. There may be plenty of breakwater eddies and cross currents in the sea, but the tide goes on all the same.

"All these fancies and their whole array One cunning bosom sin blows quite away."

The principle is "Let no man deceive you. He that doeth righteousness is righteous." Do not trust your convictions. They are powerless in the fight.

Secondly we learn from this talking donkey that many men may deceive themselves about their condition, or the self-illusion and compromise of sin. These convictions will never, by themselves, keep a man from evil, but they may lead men to try compromise, just as Balaam did. He would to, but he would not, for the life of him curse, **and he evidently thought he was a hero in firmness and a martyr to duty.** He would not curse in words.

But he did it another way, by means of Baalpeor. "And Israel abode in Shittim and the people began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab. And they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods: and the people did eat, and bowed down to their gods. And Israel joined himself unto Baalpeor: and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. And the Lord said unto Moses, Take all the heads of the people, and hang them up before the Lord against the sun, that the fierce anger of the Lord may be turned away from Israel. And Moses said unto the judges of Israel, Slay ye every one his men that were joined unto Baalpeor," Numbers 25:1-5.

So we find the principle that men make compromises between duty and inclinations. Keeping the letter of the Law and breaking

the spirit of the Law. Obeying in some respects and paying themselves for their obedience by their disobedience in others. Very devout, attentive to all religious observances, and yet sinning on. We find such men playing tricks upon themselves, and really tricking themselves into the idea that they are very good men.

This is the great characteristic of the old sin nature, its deceitfulness. It always comes as "an angel of light," like some of those weird stories in which we read about a strange guest at a banquet who discloses a skeleton below the wedding garment. "Father of lies." (NIHIL INBECILLIUS DEMUDATO, DIABOLE). **The more one sins, the less capable he becomes of discerning evil.** Conscience becomes sophisticated, and it is always possible to refine away its judgments.

"By reason of use have their sense exercised to discern." "Take heed lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."

Thirdly, we learn from the Lord opening the mouth of this ass **the absurdity and unreasonableness of unrighteousness.** We look at Balaam and think, How could a man purpose anything so foolish **as to go on seeking for an opportunity to break a Law which he know to be irrevocable?** Yet what he did do is but what every sinner does.

All sin is a breach of the Law, which at the very moment of breaking is known to be imperative. All sin is thus the overbearing of conscience or the sophistication of conscience, and all sin is the incurring voluntarily of consequences which at the moment are or might be known to be certain and far reaching and far overbalancing any fancied "wages of unrighteousness." Thus, all sin is the overbearing of reason or the sophistication of reason by passion. Men know the absurdity of sin, and yet men will go on sinning. "A rogue is a round-about fool."

All wrong doing is a mighty blunder. It is only righteousness which is congruous with a man's reason, with a man's conscience, with a man's highest happiness. "The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom."

And the ass teach us "the wages of unrighteousness." How did Balaam's experi-

ment end, his death? He tried to make "the best of both worlds" so he ran with the hare and hunted with the hounds. And this was how it all ended, as it always does, as it always will. How death ends all illusions, sternly breaks down all the compromises and reveals all the absurdities. Men are one thing or another. Learn, then, the lesson that no gifts, no talents, no victories, no aspirations will avail. Let this sad figure which looks out upon us with gray streaming hair and uplifted hands from beside the altar on pisgah speak to us.

How hear the haven it is possible to be cast away. Balaam said, "Let me die the death of the righteous." And his death was thus. "Balaam they slew with the sword." And his epitaph is "Balaam the son of Beor who loved the wages of righteousness, got them and perished."

Notice these two pictures here of an un-filled desire. Take the first scene. **A prophet who knows God and knows God's will and God's Word** is standing on the mountain top and as he looks down over the valley beneath him, with its acacia trees and the swift river, there spread the tents of Israel. He sees them, and he knows and says, "They are a people whom the Lord hath blessed." "Brought there to curse, he blesses them altogether." And as he gazes upon their ordered ranks and sees somewhat of the wondrous future that lay before them. His mind is filled with the thought of all the blessedness of that righteous nation, and the sigh of longing comes to his lips. **May I be with them in life and death, may I have no higher honor. No calmer end, than to lie down and die as one of the chosen people, with memories of a Divine hand that has protected me all through the past, and quiet hopes of the same hand holding me up in the great darkness.** Here is a devout aspiration, and a worthy desire.

Now look at the other side of this picture. Midian has seduced Israel to idolatry and its constant companion, sensual sin. The old saw giver has his last achievement to punish the idolater. "Avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites, afterward thou shalt be gathered to thy people." So each tribe gives its contin-

gent to the fight and under the fierce and prompt Phinehas, whose javelin had already smitten one of the chief offenders, they go forth. Fire and sword, devastation and victory, mark their track. The princes of Midian fall before the swift rush of the desert-born invaders, and sad, strange company, among them is the "the man who saw the vision of the almighty, and knew the knowledge of the Most High."

He who had taught Moab the great purest lessons of morality, "He saw from afar the Scepter rise out of Israel and the Star from Jacob." And he longed to die the death of the righteousness.

The on set of the avenging host, with the "shout of a king" in their midst, the terror of the flight, the riot of havoc and bloodshed, and finally, the quick thrust of the sharp Israelite sword in some strong hand, and the gray hairs all dabbled with the blood, they were what the man came to who had once breathed the honest desired. "Let me die the death of the righteous and let my last end be like his." There is a sure solemn lesson for us, all here.

A touching the danger of mere vague religious desires and convictions which we do not allow to determine our conduct. "Ever learning but never coming to" or "Having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof." "Hearers of the Word, but not doers of the Word." Balaam evidently had much knowledge.

Look at these points: His knowledge included the covenant Name of God. His knowledge of a pure morality and a spiritual worship far beyond sacrificial notions, and in some respects higher than the then Old Testament standpoint. The knowledge which is implied in the text, is of a future state, which had gone far into the background, if it had not been altogether lost among the Israelites. It is not remarkable that the spiritual ideas of this man were in advance of Israel's at this time. That there seems to have lingered among these "outsiders" more of a pure faith than in Israel itself?

What a lesson there is here for us of the souls led by the Lord and enlightened by the

Lord beyond the pale of Judaism. But all this knowledge, what use was it to Balaam? He knows about God. But does He seek to serve Him? He preaches morality to Moab, **and he teaches Midian to teach the children of Israel to commit fornication.** He knows something of the blessedness of a righteous man's death, and maybe sees faintly the shining gates beyond. But how does it all end? **What a gulf between knowledge of the Word of God and life.**

What is the use of correct ideas about God? They may be the foundation of holy thoughts, and they are meant to be so. I am not setting up emotion above principle, or fancying that there can be Christianity without theology, **but for what are all our thoughts about God given us?**

That they may **influence our souls.**

That they may **subdue our wills.**

That they may mold our **practical life.**

If they do not do that, then what do they do? They constitute a positive hindrance, like the dead lava blocks that choke the mouth of a crater, or the two deposits on the bottom of a boiler, soot outside and crust inside, which keep the fire from getting at the water. **They have lost their power because they are so familiar. They are weakened by not being practiced.** The very organs of intelligence are, as if they were, ossified. **Self-satisfaction lays hold on the possession of these ideas and shields itself against all appeals with the fact of possessing them. Many a man mistakes, in his own case, the KNOWLEDGE of the Truth for OBEDIENCE to the Truth.** All this is seen in everyday life. And with reference to all manner of convictions, but it is much apparent and most fatal about Christian Truth.

I am talking and appealing to the one who hears and knows all about **the Word.** What more is needed? That you should do what you know, be not hearers only, that you would yield your whole being to Christ, the living Word.

Notice also here, Balaam as an example of convictions which remain ineffective. It is not without some sense of his own character

and some forebodings of what was possibly brooding over him that he uttered these words of the text. But they were transitory emotions. And they pass away.

"Let me die the death of the righteous." I imagine that everyone that hears the Gospel proclaimed is, at some time or other, conscious of dawning thoughts which, if followed, would lead them to a decision for the Lord Jesus Christ. I suppose that every man among us is conscious of thoughts visiting him many a time when he least expects them, which if honestly obeyed, would work an entire revolution in his life.

I do not want to speak as if unbelieving men were the only people who were unfaithful to the consciences, but rather to deal with what is a besetting sin of us all, though it reaches its highest aggravation in reference to the Gospel. Such stings of conviction come to us all, but how are they deadened?

1. **By simple neglect.** Pay no attention to them. Do not do anything in consequence, and they will gradually disappear. The voice unheard will cease to speak. Non-obedience to conscience will in the end almost throttle conscience.

2. **We can deaden it by angry rejection.**

3. **By busy occupation with the entire world.**

4. **By sinful occupation with it.**

Then consider such dealing with our convictions leaves us far worse men than before, and if continued will end in utter insensibility.

What should we do with our convictions? Reverently follow them. And in so doing will grow and increase, and lead us at last to the Lord and the peace of the Lord.

Special application of all this to our attitude towards Christian Truth.

Notice also Balaam is an instance of wishes that are never fulfilled. he wished to die in righteousness. How did he die? Miserably. And why? **First, because his wish was deficient in character.** It was one among a great many feeble and not predominant, occasioned by circumstances and so fading when

these disappeared. Like many men's relation to the Gospel who would **like to be Christians**, and are not. These vagrant wishes are nothing, mere catpaws of wind, not a breeze. They are not real, even while they last. And so they come to nothing.

Secondly, because it was partially wrong in its object. He was willing to die the death, but not live the life of righteousness. Like many men who would like to go to Heaven when they die, but who will not be Christians when they live. They want to die like Christians, but not live like Christians.

Now his wish was not wrong, but it was not enough. Such a wish led to no action. Now God hears the faintest wish. He does not require that we should will strongly, but he does require that we should desire, and that we should act according to our desires.

Let us close with this ass that opened her mouth because of the Lord, and see a brief picture of a righteous death. And if you feel that it is blessed, then let that desire lead you to Christ, and all will be well. Remember how Balaam ended, and stands in the New Testament as an evil man and the type of a false teacher. Finally beware of knowledge which is not operative in conduct, of convictions which are neglected and pass away, of vague desires which come to nought. "Woe unto them! for they have gone the way of Cain. And ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core," Jude 11. "Which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness."

Balaam wanted to die a righteous death while being unrighteous. That is why the Lord opened the ass's mouth so that we could learn the error and the way of Balaam. Does not nature teach us something?

He Haw! He Haw!

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