

The Unseen God

**“¹But now, this is what the LORD says—
he who created you, Jacob,
he who formed you, Israel:
“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
²When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
³For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;” (Isaiah 43:1-3)**

These words were spoken to Israel more than 500 years after the Exodus during what many people call the second Exodus, Israel’s captivity in Babylon. They were spoken as words of comfort and reassurance that no matter how bad the circumstance, God was faithful to his promise and he would be with them. They were words that Israel would have been prone to doubt since they had just been taken from their Promised Land and to once again become captives to a foreign nation. But they’re important words because they reflect the heart of God for his people.

Israel became God’s people when God promised to bless Abraham. From Genesis 12, **“²I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name**

great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” From that time on, Abraham’s descendants—the people of Israel wrestled with what it meant to be blessed by God.

This is the last message in our series we’ve called “Lessons from the Wilderness” where we’ve taken snapshots of Israel’s Exodus out of Egypt to see what lessons we can glean. Today, turn with me to Numbers 22. Now, in all of the snapshots we’ve looked at over the last few weeks, Israel has been front and center. But today’s story is a brilliantly written account where Israel is not the main character. Instead, they’re tucked away safely in the distance, completely unaware of what’s happening around them.

This is the story of Balaam. If you grew up in Sunday School, you probably think about this as the story of Balaam and his donkey—because when we teach kids, we tend to highlight the amazing and quirky things, even if they’re not the main point of the story. So, let me just say right now that while the talking donkey is significant and even a provides a little comic relief, it’s not the main focus. So, with all that said, let’s walk through the story. [wide pic]

The Israelites had been wandering in the wilderness for almost 40 years. The generation that came out of Egypt and were afraid to enter the Promised Land, was almost gone and they were about ready to finally enter. [medium pic] Israel camped in

the plains of Moab, right across the Jordan river from Jericho, where they would eventually cross into Canaan. It would have been right about here. [plains of Moab pic]

Politically, this was the time of city-states, which means that each independent city would control the area around it. The more powerful the king and his army, the more surrounding land they could control.

Word had gotten around that the Israelites, a traveling group of nomads, had been winning some impressive battles. So, when they camped in Moab, their king, Balak got pretty anxious. Israel had a lot of people, which meant they would deplete the land's resources and not leave a lot for his people. And he wasn't the only one who was nervous. The Midianites to the south weren't particularly thrilled about them being there either, but even together, they weren't strong enough to push Israel out.

Now, the religion of the day consisted of each city worshiping the god they believed lived in that territory. But these gods weren't interested in how people behaved. Pagan religions had little to do with morality. As long as the people offered the right sacrifices and did the proscribed rituals, the god would protect them and their territory. It was strictly a relationship of convenience.

Well, Moab needed help, so the king did what any smart leader would do—he sought out the best diviner money could buy to put a curse on Israel to weaken them and make them vulnerable to attack. The best diviner around was named Balaam.

So, the king sent some men to get Balaam, and they gave him this message, **“⁵A people has come out of Egypt; they cover the face of the land and have settled next to me. ⁶Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed.”** Notice the language of that last line. Sound familiar?

Diviners like Balaam didn't work for just one god, but they *were* thought to have a special skill or connection with the gods, so they could speak to them, interpret omens and pronounce blessings and curses. So, when they offered to pay him for his services, he said, *“I'll let you know in the morning if I want the job.”*

That night, Israel's God, Yahweh, said to Balaam in verse 12, **“Don't go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed.”** So, in the morning, he told them he couldn't take the job.

So, the men went *back* to the king who wasn't satisfied with Balaam's answer. Verse 15, **“Balak sent other officials, more numerous and more distinguished than the first. They came to Balaam and said: ‘This is what Balak son of Zippor says: Do not let anything keep you from coming to me, because I will reward you handsomely and do whatever you say. Come and put a curse on these people for me.’ (15-17)**

Now, at first, Balaam comes off as a good guy because he rebuffs their offer and says, **“I wouldn’t do it for all the silver and gold in his palace.” (vs. 18)** But we know that Balaam he wasn’t as upright as he seems. For instance, Numbers 25 tells us that after Balaam leaves, some Moabite women went to the Israelite camp to seduce the men and entice them into worshipping Baal. Well, we find out in Numbers 31:16 that they were following the advice Balaam gave to the king of Moab as he was leaving for home. *“If I can’t curse them, you can weaken them by getting them to turn their backs on their God.”*

While at first he tells them he won’t do it, it seems like the money offer was enticing because he backed off and said, “OK, you guys stay another night, let me check with God.” I can imagine how that conversation went. Balaam says, *“Listen, God—whoever you are. Did you hear how much money they’re going to offer me? Would you really want to keep me from all that cash? Think of all the cool things I could do with it.”* So, God says, *“OK, Balaam, go with them, but only tell them what I say to tell them.”*

Well, when they get up in the morning and Balaam packs up his donkey, it says God is angry with Balaam. Now, this seems strange because God *told* him he could go. But I believe God knew he couldn’t trust Balaam. He agreed to only say what God told him to say, but God wanted to make sure. This is where the donkey comes in.

Three times on the trip to Moab, Balaam and his donkey come to a narrowing of the road when an angel appears only to the donkey. Each time the donkey refuses to go

any further and each time Balaam beats it to get it to go. But the last time, the donkey is tired of getting beaten—or actually, *God* is tired of Balaam beating the donkey. So, God causes the donkey to speak to Balaam. *“Why do you have to beat me like that? Is this something I typically do?”* Balaam says, *“That’s a good point!”*

That’s when the angel appears to Balaam and says in verse 32, **“I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me.”** **The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared it.** Then God says again, *“Now, go with them, but only say what I tell you to say...seriously!”*

God used the donkey as an object lesson to say, “Balaam, you are an ass. And you need to know who’s in charge here. Just like that donkey will only go where I allow to go and will say what I want it to say, you will also only go where I want you to go and say what I want you to say. And if you mess with my people, I will mess you up!”

What’s interesting is that God stops the donkey three times. The first two times the donkey does what donkeys do. But the third time, God basically takes control of the donkey and speaks directly through her. This is interesting because we’ll see that God does the same thing with Balaam. Twice, he let’s Balaam do his thing, but the third time, God takes control. Let’s go on.

Balaam makes the three-week trip to Moab. By this time, the king had been looking at the Israelite camp for a couple of months so he's anxious to get on with the cursing.

So, Balaam tells the king to build seven altars—because if the gods are going to do you a favor, you need to do *them* a favor. So, with the king and all his officials there, God gives a word to Balaam, only instead of a curse, he says in 23:8, **“How can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom God has not denounced?”** And he says this that reflects the blessing of God to Abraham that his descendants would be as many as the sand on the beach, **“Who can count the dust of Jacob or number even a fourth of Israel?”**

And the king says, “Hey, wait a minute! I hired you to curse them, not to bless them.” Balaam says, *“Don't blame me. I'm just the messenger.”* So, they move to a different location, make more altars and Balaam says, verse 20, **“²⁰I have received a command to bless; he has blessed, and I cannot change it. ²¹No misfortune is seen in Jacob, no misery observed in Israel. The Lord is with them; the shout of the King is among them...²³There is no divination against Jacob, no evil omens against Israel. It will now be said of Jacob and of Israel, ‘See what God has done!’”**

At this point, the king is frustrated, but not deterred. He takes him to another location and they do the routine again. Only this time, Balaam doesn't get the opportunity to perform the normal rituals because God takes control. He looks out at the

Israelite camp and says. Verse 24:5, **“How beautiful are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel! Like valleys they spread out, like gardens beside a river, like aloes planted by the LORD like cedars beside the waters...God brought them out of Egypt; they have the strength of a wild ox”** and in verse 9 he repeats word for word the blessing God gave to Abraham, **“May those who bless you be blessed and those who curse you be cursed.”**

There's more to the story that we'll come back to in a minute, but already, we should start to see the point of this story come through and it's this: *God will be faithful to his people because God is faithful to his purpose.*

One of the things we see in the story of the Exodus is that God is determined to fulfill his promise to Abraham that the whole world will be blessed through him. He chose the people of Israel to be the vessels to carry that blessing. Over and over through the Old Testament, God says, *“It's not because you're all that great. In fact, a lot of the time, you're not even good. But I will bless you because that's what I've decided to do.”*

And you see God's faithfulness play out here because while Israel was completely unaware, God was working behind the scenes to protect them and his blessing.

But it gets better. After the third blessing, the king is furious, and he tells Balaam he's not going to pay him and that he should just go home. And Balaam's answer is the same thing he said all along, *“I already told you I can't say anything good or bad if God doesn't tell me to.”* But then, before he goes, God gives him a bonus message, but this

time the message isn't about the current situation, it's something that will happen down the road. He starts in 24:14, **"Now I am going to my people; come, and I will advise you what this people (meaning Israel) will do to your people *in the days to come.*"**

Then in 24:17,¹⁷**"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the people of Sheth. ¹⁸Edom will be conquered; Seir, his enemy, will be conquered, but Israel will grow strong. ¹⁹A ruler will come out of Jacob and destroy the survivors of the city."**

Now, one thing you should understand about Jewish prophecy is that it typically has short-term and a long-term fulfillment. Here, the short-term fulfillment is King David. In fact, it says specifically that when David became King, he defeated Moab and the rest of his enemies. That was the height of Israel's strength.

But there's also a long-term fulfillment. Notice, back in verse 14, the phrase "in the days to come" is a reference to what is sometimes called "the latter days" or the "coming age." That's the clue that this is a prophecy about Israel's Messiah.

In fact, Balaam adds three bonus oracles about some other nations and says, in essence, "These people, Israel, will continue on after all of you have long been forgotten." And that's certainly true. Who has heard of the Moabites or the Amalekites or the Kenites? Only from the Bible. And yet Israel is still around.

But even that's not the fulfilment. The story of Balaam foreshadows the coronation of future King. You see, more than a thousand years later, during Passover a man rides into the Jewish capital city of Jerusalem on, of all things, a donkey. And people shouted blessings to the coming king and laid down palm branches to pave the way.

But this king wasn't just riding into town to become the king of Israel and the enemy of every other nation. He came to be the king of anyone who would receive him as their king. When someone receives him as their king, they become part of God's purpose and one of his people. John 1:12 says about Jesus, **"Those who receive him, those who call upon his name, to them he gave the right to be children of God."**

In the New Testament in Romans, chapter 8, the Apostle Paul writes, **"²⁸And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."** This is true whether you see it or not.

There might be some of you who need that reassurance today. You're going through some difficult times and you wonder whether God is really faithful. I think the greatest lesson we learn from the wilderness is that we can't always look at our circumstances as evidence of whether God is with us or whether he really cares. Trust him and know that he is working out his purpose. In fact, Paul continues in verse 38, **"³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything**

else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

There are some of you who really need to know the truth of that promise, because you're experiencing some tough things. Sure, some of it might be the result of decisions you've made in the past, and you need to know that God still cares and he will still be faithful to you. Some of you are the victim of events that seem to have conspired against you. What this story tells us is that even we have been unfaithful to God in the past, he will be faithful to us and even if we don't see it, God is protecting his people and working things out for them. I want to spend the last few moments of today meditating on this simple prayer.

God, I trust that you are faithful to your people. Count me among your people. Turn your face toward me and forgive my sins and use me according to your good purpose. See me, sustain me, watch over me and protect me. Help me to trust when I don't see and live faithfully to you in all things. May your promises to me be fulfilled.