

Numbers 23-24: Balaam's Prophecies

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“Then Balaam said to Balak, “Build seven altars for me here, and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams.” And Balak did just as Balaam had spoken, and Balak and Balaam offered a bull and a ram on each altar.”

-Numbers 23:1-2

As we continue our study through Numbers, we are continuing our story through the fascinating account of the prophet Balaam. As we talked about last week, Balaam is actually a pretty ambiguous figure. He is a prophet of God, but he practices sorcery. He is an example of submitting to the will of God over ambition in the last chapter as well as the next two, but he later succumbs to his ambition and leads the Israelites into idolatry through a scheme to marry the men of Israel off to the Moabite women.

In the last chapter we saw this tension in Balaam. Though he was outwardly obedient to God, it is heavily intimated to us that internally he was being driven by his ambition. God then sends an angel to judge Balaam, but he is saved by his donkey and even rebuked by the same donkey, and Balaam actually submits to this rebuke. So when this chapter picks up, we see that Balaam is sacrificing to God before he prophecies over the nation of Israel. This, along with the rest of the events in this chapter, shows us that Balaam had indeed learned his lesson.

To quickly summarize Numbers 23 and 24. After sacrificing to God, Balaam goes to seek the will of God. God responds to Balaam and gives him a word of blessing for the people of Israel. Balak is incensed by this, since he desires for Balaam to curse the nation of Israel, and leads him to another spot to try to coax a curse out of Balaam. This pattern repeats itself a total of four times, each time with Balaam blessing the nation of Israel and cursing their opponents. Later on in this paper we will discuss the four blessings of Balaam, one of which contains a really interesting prophecy about Christ, but before we do that, I believe that Balaam has something important to teach us about the gift of prophecy, and other spiritual gifts in general.

The Gift of Prophecy

“Then Balaam said to Balak, “Stand by your burnt offering, and I will go; perhaps the LORD will come to meet me, and whatever He shows me I will tell you.” So he went to a

desolate height. And God met Balaam, and he said to Him, "I have prepared the seven altars, and I have offered on each altar a bull and a ram." Then the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth, and said, "Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak." So he returned to him, and there he was, standing by his burnt offering, he and all the princes of Moab. And he took up his oracle and said..."

-Numbers 23:3-7

The word prophet, (in the Hebrew "nabi" in the Greek "prophetes") essentially means a spokesperson or an ambassador. As such, this word is related to the word "angel", which means "messenger", and "apostle", which also refers to a delegate of a messenger. And all of these words carry the exact same idea, a prophet is one who speaks on behalf of the divine. Meaning, that the prophet is not someone who makes their own pronouncements, but instead they are someone who are charged to faithfully carry the words that were given to them, like a messenger, an ambassador, or a delegate.

We see this definition play out in this story. Balak seems to be under a false impression of what a prophet is, and we will talk more about his misconception because it is fairly common even to this day, but Balaam keeps reinforcing the fact that he is merely the carrier of a message and not one who can issue a pronouncement. In the above passage we see this explicitly stated, when we are told that "the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth..." Once again showing us that the words that Balaam speaks over Israel are not from him, but from God.

This is why this account necessarily follows the account with Balaam's donkey. The true prophet is the one who submits fully to the words given to them. The false prophet is the one who is not submitting to any spirit other than their own.

Inspiration Versus Possession

"...knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

-2 Peter 1:20-21

This is also related to the concept of "inspiration" which, in the Greek, is a conjunction of two words "theos" meaning God and the second "pneo", meaning to breathe out. Meaning that someone who is "inspired" is someone who is filled with divine breath. They are moved not by their own spirit or animation, but are "carried along" by the Spirit of God.

In a lower sense I think we can all understand this. All of us have experienced moments of genuine inspiration. This can happen when we are in the process of speaking to someone or in the process of creating something, especially in areas where we have competency. At a certain moment we can feel “directed” by an unseen force, or “carried along” by an unseen power. We are no longer speaking, but we feel as though we are *conveying* things that we weren’t fully aware of. The important point is that when we are truly “inspired” what we are doing is an act of creation, in which we are transformed by the experience in a positive way.

In other words, someone who is “inspired” to do something, or say something, we feel elevated at the end of the experience. They will feel as though they were given the ability to do or say something that they previously couldn’t, but were “carried along” by a power outside themselves. At the far end of this is what is happening to Balaam. He isn’t just being inspired by a good thing of God, but by God Himself. He isn’t just participating with the Spirit of God, he is directly speaking the words of God to Balak.

But, this gift seems to be related to the type of artistic inspiration that we were talking about before. Since the word of God is too high for us to understand, it would be necessary for it to be filtered through a medium that we could grasp, namely a poetic device like a simile or metaphor, or a symbol, or a parable. This is why the prophetic books, like Isaiah and Daniel, are so filled with symbols, metaphors, and poetic speech. I like what the pulpit commentary says about this:

“Took up his parable. לָשׁוּן (cf. Num. 21:27). Balaam’s utterances were in the highest degree poetical, according to the antithetic form of the poetry of that day, which delighted in sustained parallelisms, in lofty figures, and in abrupt turns. The “mashal” of Balaam resembled the “burden” of the later prophets in this, that it was not a discourse uttered to men, but a thing revealed in him of which he had to deliver himself as best he might in such words as came to him. His inward eye was fixed on this revelation, and he gave utterance to it without consideration of those who heard.”

-Joseph Exell - “The Pulpit Commentary”

There is a similar, yet inverted instance, that we are also all familiar with. In the Bible, the Spirit of God, or an angelic entity, can inspire men and women of God to speak and act on behalf of God. But, Demonic entities can also take possession of a person.

“...in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will.”

-2 Timothy 2:25-26

In the latter instance the faithful person is carried along by a benevolent spirit, or even the very Spirit of God, in order to participate with a divine vision and give shape to divine wisdom. In doing this, the person is not turned into a puppet or a vessel of God, but they are asked to participate in God's will and create in the beauty that inspired them. This is similar to what we see Adam doing in Genesis 2:

"Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name."

-Genesis 2:19

God brings objective reality to Adam, and Adam participates with this reality by "naming" or assigning identity to the various creatures brought to him by God. The former, possession, is instead when a dark entity asserts itself over the will of a person and lowers them to their most destructive impulses. A simple example of this is when someone is drunk. By being drunk they aren't inspired, or elevated to create, they are instead brought low, their self-control and self-will are eroded, allowing the person to feel more liberated by sacrificing their autonomy.

Another example of this is when we succumb to temptation. When we give into our wrath and say things that we wouldn't normally say, when we give into our lust and fantasize about others in ways we wouldn't normally do, or we succumb to ambition and make selfish decisions that we wouldn't otherwise make. These are all near examples of what we would call demonic possession. But the far end of this is seen in parts of our Bibles:

"And when He stepped out on the land, there met Him a certain man from the city who had demons for a long time. And he wore no clothes, nor did he live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he cried out, fell down before Him, and with a loud voice said, "What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg You, do not torment me!" For He had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. For it had often seized him, and he was kept under guard, bound with chains and shackles; and he broke the bonds and was driven by the demon into the wilderness."

-Luke 8:27-29

By whatever means, this man was driven out of his rational mind by demonic entities that had taken possession of him. Just as the person inspired by a landscape to make a beautiful painting is related to the prophet who is inspired by our glorious Lord, though

in a far different scale, so the person who loses self-control in a fit of wrath is related to the person who loses autonomy over their soul through communion with the demonic.

Sorcery Versus Gifting

“Now when Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he did not go as at other times, to seek to use sorcery, but he set his face toward the wilderness. And Balaam raised his eyes, and saw Israel encamped according to their tribes; and the Spirit of God came upon him. Then he took up his oracle and said:

“The utterance of Balaam the son of Beor, The utterance of the man whose eyes are opened, The utterance of him who hears the words of God, Who sees the vision of the Almighty, Who falls down, with eyes wide open...”

-Numbers 24:1-3

In the above passage there is something else that is really interesting. Though we could safely assume that Balaam would have been a common pagan prophet who would practice sorcery and witchcraft, the above verse confirms this idea. We are told directly that Balaam “did not go as at other times, to seek to use sorcery...”. Meaning that usually Balaam did use sorcery to exercise prophecy, but in this passage he is experiencing something very different than what he is used to. Meaning that this might be the only time in Balaam’s life that he actually partook of the true gift of prophecy.

What is a “gift”? The Greek word for gift is “charismata”, in the church we have a denomination of Christians who call themselves “charismatic” because of their emphasis on spiritual gifts. But we can clearly see that we actually get our word “charisma” from this word. This gives us a hint into what this word is all about. It seems to be related to the concept of “aptitude” or ability. To put this another way, someone who is “gifted” at say basketball is not necessarily someone who is better than everyone else at basketball, but instead someone who has an innate ability to be good at basketball. If they apply their gifting properly, they can excel at basketball more than other people.

The gifts of God seem to work in the same way. Balaam seems to have had this innate ability in him at all times, this is the only time that he had applied himself to it in the proper way, and this might be because he didn't really understand his own gifting that well. The above verse begins by telling us that "when Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel..." Meaning that Balaam here finally understood that his gift was there, not to profit himself, but to bless God. This same concept is echoed by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 when he explains that our spiritual gifts are what prepare us for our unique roles within the body of Christ:

"But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased."
-1 Corinthians 12:18

Why do we have the gifts that we do? To please God. Balaam recognizes this connection and seeks to please God even further. And so, instead of turning to his familiar tricks of the trade, he turns his face towards the wilderness and further seeks the word of God. By doing this, he is opened up to professing incredible prophecies about the nation of Israel and the coming Messiah.

The person who understands this is the one who is able to find peace and fulfillment within their gifting. When we turn our gifts inwards and seek to please only ourselves, we turn to sorcery, which we will talk about more later. But when we see our gifts as serving God, we find fulfillment and freedom within them. This is what Balaam tells Balak in this passage:

"Then Balak's anger was aroused against Balaam, and he struck his hands together; and Balak said to Balaam, 'I called you to curse my enemies, and look, you have bountifully blessed them these three times! 'Now therefore, flee to your place. I said I would greatly honor you, but in fact, the LORD has kept you back from honor.' So Balaam said to Balak, 'Did I not also speak to your messengers whom you sent to me, saying, 'If Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the word of the LORD, to do good or bad of my own will. What the LORD says, that I must speak'?"

-Numbers 24:10-13

Herein is the main difference between biblical gifting and sorcery. Gifting is more or less about finding peace with our abilities by learning to submit them to the will of God. In doing so we learn the benefit of humility and we see the primary purpose of our lives is to serve and not to be served. When we do this, we become meek and humble, willing

to accept God's will for our lives. When we don't do this we turn to sorcery. I think that C.S. Lewis gives a fairly good definition of sorcery in his book "The Abolition of Man":

"There is something which unites magic and applied science while separating both from the wisdom of earlier ages. for the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. for magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men: the solution is a technique; and both, in the practice of this technique, are ready to do things hitherto regarded as disgusting and impious—such as digging up and mutilating the dead."

-C.S. Lewis - "The Abolition of Man"

The path of wisdom begins in submission to the will of God. When we learn to bow our will to God and accept reality as it is, we learn to be free. Sorcery on the other hand is trying to bend reality to fit our will by using some sort of technique. In other words, what Balaam usually did is he sought the will of God, but if God's will contradicted his own, he would use sorcery to "get the right answer from God". In other words he would use a technique in order to assure his own conscience of the goodness of his own will.

This is what Balak wanted Balaam to do. When he didn't receive the answer he wanted, he tried to tempt Balaam to use sorcery when he says: *"I said I would greatly honor you, but in fact, the LORD has kept you back from honor."* Balak wants Balaam to see God as oppressive, as standing in the way of his ambition. He then tempts Balaam to forsake the will of God and to curse the nation of Israel to benefit himself.

This gives us a pretty good idea of what sorcery actually is and what it practically represents in our everyday lives.

"Neither repented they of their murders, nor of their sorceries, nor of their fornication, nor of their thefts."

-Revelation 9:21

The sin of sorcery is placed within a list of sins that go over more normal sins like murder and theft. This should give us a hint that we can enter into the sin of sorcery without making a sacrifice on a pagan altar. To engage in sorcery, as Lewis puts it, is to seek a technique that would allow you to assert your will over reality. This can be as simple as telling a lie. When we lie we are shaping the imaginations of others to conform to our version of events as opposed to reality. We see this alluded to in Revelation 18:

“The light of a lamp shall not shine in you anymore, and the voice of bridegroom and bride shall not be heard in you anymore. For your merchants were the great men of the earth, for by your sorcery all the nations were deceived.”

-Revelation 18:23

It is unclear if the merchants mentioned above were engaged in sorcery as we tend to imagine it, but what is clear is that the effect of their sorcery is that the nations were deceived. But sometimes this temptation moves us to change the very will of God. We think that if we pray in just the right way, say the exact right words, we will change the will of God to match our own. This type of thinking is present in versions of Christianity that we call “prosperity”.

But in an even more mundane way, we can practice this sin every time we turn our gifts towards selfish ambition as opposed to serving the will of God. We can see this in Acts 8:

“But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is the great power of God.” And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time. But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.”

-Acts 8:9-13

Simon, who is converting from sorcery, believes that he can receive a gift of God to administer the Holy Spirit to whoever he wants by paying for it. To put this more simply, Simon believed that he could alter the very will of God through his own will. He wanted to turn the gifts of God towards his own ambitious desires.

Which is one final difference between gifting and sorcery. In gifting, one recognizes that they are *receiving* their ability from God. Since sorcery can be taught, it is more about the power of a spell or ritual than anything else. Meaning that sorcery has an end of control, gifting is more about surrender.

“For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?”

-1 Corinthians 4:7

It is knowing that the gift comes from God that keeps the servant of God humble, but it is the folly of sorcery to attribute power and final purpose to oneself, which assures pride and self-reliance. This fact helps us understand a man like Samson.

Samson is gifted by God to have tremendous strength, but he is commanded to maintain the nazirite vow to remind him that his power was from God. He forgets this and violates his vow in every way (most famously by allowing his hair to be cut) and he loses his power.

This is the truth that Balaam learns in this story, but tragically forgets later on. By humbling himself before God and refusing the bribes and taunts of Balak he is seeing, perhaps for the first time, that his gift is from God and for His purposes.

Prophecy in the Church

For the church, this gift hasn't fully gone away, but it does seem to have changed. What we see in the old covenant is that this gift was attached to an office, in the church, especially after the apostles, it seems to manifest itself in the church more rarely and through various members. The reason is actually very simple:

"God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds..."

-Hebrews 1:1-2

The prophets in the old covenant were there, primarily, to gradually reveal God and His Messiah to the world. Once Christ came, we received the fullest and most complete revelation of God that is possible, which also fulfilled all the previous statements by the prophets of God.

Because of this, the office of prophet would actually be a step backwards for the church. This doesn't mean that prophecy has ceased though:

"Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries. But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more

that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification.”

-1 Corinthians 14:1-5

The purpose of this gift is not to give salacious predictions, but to build up, encourage, and comfort the body of Christ, not to make a spectacle of the messenger. At a near end, pastors practice this gift. When we explain and apply the word of God to individual circumstances, that is a “weaker”, yet still powerful, manifestation of this gift. However, the “strong” manifestation of this gift does happen in the body of Christ, just more rarely.

This is when a member of the church does receive a specific revelation for some future event, usually concerning a unique circumstance. But because this is rare, it has to be tested.

“Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good.”

-1 Thessalonians 5:19-21

A More Excellent Way

“But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.”

-1 Corinthians 12:31

However in all of this, it is easy to be distracted from the main point of this. The Corinthians had become so fixated on the more supernatural manifestations of the Spirit that they lost sight of the more consequential ministry of the Spirit:

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.”

-1 Corinthians 13:1-3

The purpose of God is not to make us powerful or knowledgeable. Though these are good things, the main goal of God is to make us more like Himself, and God is love. Once we turn our gifts towards ourselves and our interests we have missed the true power of God's Spirit. Remember that Christ's power and majesty were not shown through an act of power but instead of surrender.

“By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”

-1 John 3:16

From the Bible's perspective, it is far more important that we become good people rather than great people. This is again what Balaam learns here, but tragically forgets later. He reaches the height of his gift, not by pleasing man or by receiving honor, but simply by being faithful to God. By loving God at all costs he was given a vision of the coming Messiah.

This is something that we are not taught anymore. Modern technology affords us with immense power to change and influence the world around us, but power can corrupt the untrained soul:

“...not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil.”

-1 Timothy 3:6

If we don't know that the purpose of power is love, then why wouldn't we simply use our power for our own benefit at the cost of others? To put this more simply, if we haven't mastered ourselves and learned to bow to the will of God, we will become selfish and tyrannical if we receive power.

The Immutable Will of God

“Balak the king of Moab has brought me from Aram, From the mountains of the east. ‘Come, curse Jacob for me, And come, denounce Israel!’ ‘How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how shall I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced?’

-Numbers 23:7-8

We will go over this point quickly since it is simple. Another reason that sorcery is folly is because the will of God can't be changed:

“God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? Behold, I have received a command to bless; He has blessed, and I cannot reverse it.”

-Numbers 23:19-20

This means that the purpose of our faith and religion can't be to change the will of God, but instead to discover the will of God and to bow to it. But it is in this surrender that we find peace and joy. What the Christian discovers is that we surrender to God's will not

just because we have to, but because His will is always best. The cross reveals the fullest expression of this truth.

“Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour. “Father, glorify Your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, saying, “I have both glorified it and will glorify it again”

-John 12:27-28

Christ comes face to face with the will of God that moves Him towards death on the cross. Instead of fighting that will, Christ chooses to submit to it, trusting that His Father's will is best:

“He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.”

-Matthew 26:39

Strangely, this is also what Balaam does in this story. He denies himself wealth, power, and prestige, and even risks his life to offend Balak four separate times. Both by blessing his enemies, but also in cursing the enemies of Israel.

For us though, the fact that God's will is immutable is a source of incredible strength and hope:

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

-Hebrews 13:8

“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.”

-James 1:17

If the will of God could be changed, then the promises that God has made towards us would be just as fragile as His word. But because God doesn't change and His will is solid, we have assurance that is just as strong as God's will:

“For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, “Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you.” And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute. Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for

refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”

-Hebrews 6:13-20

To understand the power of this principle it might be good to look at Balaam's specific prophecies over the nation of Israel.

The Blessedness of Israel

“For from the top of the rocks I see him, And from the hills I behold him; There! A people dwelling alone, Not reckoning itself among the nations. “Who can count the dust of Jacob, Or number one-fourth of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, And let my end be like his!”

-Numbers 23:9-10

We will go through these specific blessings fairly quickly, but they are important to understand. The first blessing that Balaam pronounces over Israel is that they would be blessed and holy amongst the nations. This gives us a pretty good clue of what it means that Israel is the chosen people of God. The apostle Paul clarifies this idea later on when he is preaching to the gentiles in Acts 17:

“And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, “so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; “for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’”

-Acts 17:26-28

It isn't as though God was completely uninvolved in the affairs of our ancestors, he had given them boundaries for their dwellings and they had life in God the same as the Jews. What sets the nation of Israel apart is that God dwelt within them. He wasn't just ordering their history like the gentiles, He was a *part* of their history in a unique way. This made them “holy” or “set a part” from the other nations.

This is why Balaam ends his prophecy by saying “Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his!” As we have seen through this book, the nation of Israel is far from innocent in their behavior, but because they were the nation in which God would

dwell, they had a “righteous role” among the nations. This picture is fulfilled in Christ, in that when God comes in the flesh to be a part of His own creation, He does so as a Jewish man.

A part of this prophecy is that God would allow the Jews to be numerous and prosperous. This has held true throughout the millenia, that even without a homeland, the Jews have continued to thrive and prosper no matter where they dwell.

“He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, Nor has He seen wickedness in Israel. The LORD his God is with him, And the shout of a King is among them. God brings them out of Egypt; He has strength like a wild ox. “For there is no sorcery against Jacob, Nor any divination against Israel. It now must be said of Jacob And of Israel, ‘Oh, what God has done!’ Look, a people rises like a lioness, And lifts itself up like a lion; It shall not lie down until it devours the prey, And drinks the blood of the slain.”

-Numbers 23:21-24

The second blessing that he speaks elaborates on the first. When he says “He has not observed iniquity in Jacob...” This is obviously not to say that Israel was sinless, we just spent numerous weeks seeing God judge the sin of His own people. This is instead to show how God had given His people the means to be cleansed before Him.

Unlike the pagan nations who had rituals that, in some ways, pointed to the eventual role of the Messiah, they were not rituals accepted by God and therefore they didn’t provide forgiveness for the people practicing them. This doesn’t mean that these people couldn’t be saved, just that their religion was not the primary means of their salvation. This is different for Israel, it was the Jewish faith that would actually save people and lead them to forgiveness in the ancient world. As Jesus puts this point:

“You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews.”

-John 4:22

The end of the prophecy is fairly simple. Though many forces came against Israel throughout the centuries, they would all fail as the Egyptians failed to kill them. So when Balaam says “there is no sorcery against Jacob”, he is certainly not saying that there wouldn’t be *attempted* sorcery against them, just that it wouldn’t be successful. As the prophet Isaiah puts this point centuries later:

"No weapon formed against you shall prosper, And every tongue which rises against you in judgment You shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, And their righteousness is from Me," Says the LORD."

-Isaiah 54:17

"How lovely are your tents, O Jacob! Your dwellings, O Israel! Like valleys that stretch out, Like gardens by the riverside, Like aloes planted by the LORD, Like cedars beside the waters. He shall pour water from his buckets, And his seed shall be in many waters. His king shall be higher than Agag, And his kingdom shall be exalted. "God brings him out of Egypt; He has strength like a wild ox; He shall consume the nations, his enemies; He shall break their bones And pierce them with his arrows. 'He bows down, he lies down as a lion; And as a lion, who shall rouse him?' "Blessed is he who blesses you, And cursed is he who curses you."

-Numbers 24:5-9

The final blessing isn't just towards the people of Israel, but it seems to be for their land and infrastructure. That their king will be powerful and their "dwellings" will be prosperous. This is once again true. When Israel left the land it was fairly desolate and unusable. But since their return in the mid twentieth century, it has blossomed in a profound, even miraculous way. And throughout the nation's history before Christ, even though they were relatively small in comparison to their neighbors, they have been fairly prosperous and powerful. Because of all these facts, Balaam pronounces at the end of his third blessing that: *"Blessed is he who blesses you, And cursed is he who curses you."*

The New Covenant

"I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles. Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness! For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if by any means I may provoke to jealousy those who are my flesh and save some of them. For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?"

-Romans 11:11-15

The big question that many Christians have today is, are these prophecies still intact today? The simple answer is yes, but with a caveat. Part of how we have been understanding these prophecies has been through the immutable will of God. It is the same immutable will of God that gives comfort to the strained conscience of the

Christian that ought to give comfort to the strained relationship of the modern Jew to their God, though they rejected His Messiah.

The above passage says that in the Old Covenant, the blessedness of Israel was to be the dwelling place of God. If anyone wanted to draw near to God, they had to do so through the Jewish faith. However, in the New Covenant things have changed a bit. As Paul said, the New Covenant was sealed in the blood of the Messiah shed by His own people; they had indeed “stumbled”. This might make us feel a little sad as gentiles, but Paul says that a goal of God allowing for the gentiles to be saved, and even for the gentile nations to be the dwelling place of the modern church, was to provoke the Jews towards jealousy. This means that the Jews are still chosen, though they are currently in rebellion against their God.

This is the balance the church has to maintain. On one hand we can't believe that since the Jews remain chosen by God they maintain a relationship with Him through the Old Covenant, as the writer of Hebrews puts this point:

“For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?”

-Hebrews 10:26-29

The “sin” mentioned above was not a generic sin, but specifically in context the sin spoken of here is the sin of returning to the Law and ignoring the gospel. So the Jews can't be saved through the Old Covenant, they must find salvation in Christ. But on the other hand, there could be temptation to say that therefore there is nothing special about the Jews. Paul spells out this problem in the above passage, but I really like how the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer put this point:

“The church of Christ has never lost sight of the thought that the “chosen people,” which hung the Redeemer of the world on the cross, must endure the curse of its action in long-drawn-out suffering. “The Jews are the most miserable people on earth. They are plagued everywhere, and scattered about all countries, having no certain resting place” (Luther, Table Talk). But the history of suffering of this people that God loved and punished will end in the final homecoming of the people Israel to its God. And this homecoming will take place in Israel’s conversion to Christ... The conversion of Israel is

to be the end of its people's sufferings. From this perspective, the Christian church trembles at the sight of the people Israel's history, as God's own free, terrible way with God's own people... The church's knowledge of the curse that weighs upon this people takes it far beyond any sort of cheap moralizing. Instead, it knows itself as the church that is unfaithful to its Lord over and over again, and that it shares in the humiliation that it sees in this outcast people, and full of hope it views those Israelites who have already come home, who have come to faith in the one true God in Christ, and it knows it has a bond with them as brothers and sisters."

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - "The Church and the Jewish Question"

Though Israel is in rebellion against their God, they remain God's chosen people and He will deal with them in His timing and in His way. The church fails when they think that we can solve the "Jewish problem". The history of Israel is written by God in a unique way, and as Paul puts it: *For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?"*

To put this point another way, if by rejecting Christ the Jews began what we call the church age, their return to God would certainly signify the return of Christ and the redemption of the world. This doesn't mean that the church should just leave the Jews alone, civic authorities have to protect the interests of their own people, this is their call by God, and this doesn't mean that we unfairly favor Israel above any other nation.

But it does mean that each generation of believers must seek to answer the question, "what does it mean for us to bless God's people?" As Bonhoeffer says, this isn't an easy answer, and it certainly isn't clear for the political authorities, but it is one that we are asked to wrestle with, trusting God with His own people and His own timing. There is much more I could say about this, but I am set to go to Israel in a month or so and I plan to give a more detailed talk on this topic when I return.

The Coming King

"I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; A Star shall come out of Jacob; A Scepter shall rise out of Israel, And batter the brow of Moab, And destroy all the sons of tumult. "And Edom shall be a possession; Seir also, his enemies, shall be a possession, While Israel does valiantly. Out of Jacob One shall have dominion, And destroy the remains of the city."

-Numbers 24:17-19

As stated before, the highlight of Balaam's prophecy is that as he seeks the will of God, he is brought to see the ministry of Christ. This is always the case. The more we seek

the will of God in our lives, the more we will see Jesus and His glory. The interesting thing about this prophecy is that Balaam sees the coming Messiah as an extension of Israel's blessedness and as a king over the nations and not as a savior to all the nations.

This prophecy is echoed in some famous sections of the Old Covenant, I will only quote three below:

"Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, 'Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us.' He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; The Lord shall hold them in derision. Then He shall speak to them in His wrath, And distress them in His deep displeasure: 'Yet I have set My King On My holy hill of Zion.' 'I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth for Your possession.'"

-Psalm 2:1-8

"For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace There will be no end, Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, To order it and establish it with judgment and justice From that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this."

-Isaiah 9:6-7

"I was watching in the night visions, And behold, One like the Son of Man, Coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, And they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, Which shall not pass away, And His kingdom the one Which shall not be destroyed."

-Daniel 7:13-14

All these passages are saying the exact same thing. Since the fall of mankind, and the subsequent murder of Abel by Cain, we have been in a state of extreme disunity and dysfunction. Humanity has tried to rectify this disunity in our own power which resulted in the first tower of Babel, and has remained in the fevered imaginations of the most despotic dictators of world history. But what God is promising here is that only one

figure will be able to actually accomplish this feat, His Messiah who will sit on the throne of David. Meaning that it will be a Jewish King who rules over the nations.

For most of human history this seemed like hyperbole, but these promises were held close to the nation of Israel. This is why when Christ came they were convinced that His mission was to sit on the throne of David and rule the world. This is what Satan tempts Christ with in the wilderness in Matthew 4, and it is why the Jews refer to the Messiah as the son of David. But if you notice, Christ always refers to Himself as the son of man. This was not to deny His Jewish identity, but it was to show His original mission.

What the Jews had failed to do was to properly harmonize passages like this one that sees the Messiah as a global king with passages like this one that show a different role for the Messiah:

"He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

-Isaiah 53:3-6

To be charitable to the Jews, it wasn't their arrogance that prevented them from seeing how these passages could harmonize, but the fact that God kept these passages under a mystery that was revealed in His Son. Christ showed us how these passages come together. Christ came at first as the Son of man, the One who would redeem the world from their sins and defeat the greatest enemies of mankind, sin and death. But He will come again as the son of David, the conquering King who will unify all nations and bring eternal peace and stability to this world. I like the Pulpit Commentary on this passage:

"The star is a natural and common poetic symbol of an illustrious, or, as we say, "brilliant," personage, and as such recurs many times in Scripture (cf. Job. 38:7; Isa. 14:12; Dan. 8:10; Mat. 24:29; Php. 2:15; Rev. 1:20; Rev. 2:28). The celebrated Jewish fanatic called himself Barcochab, "son of the Star," in allusion to this prophecy. A Scepter shall rise out of Israel. This further defines the "star" as a ruler of men, for the scepter is Used in that sense in the dying prophecy of Jacob (Gen. 49:10), with which Balaam was evidently acquainted...Jewish prophecy, from beginning to end, contemplated the Messiah as the Conqueror, the Subduer, and even the Destroyer of all the heathen, i.e; of all who were not Jews. It is only in the New Testament that the iron scepter with which he was to dash in pieces the heathen (Psa. 2:9) becomes the

pastoral staff wherewith he shepherds them. The prophecy was that Messiah should destroy the heathen; the fulfillment that he destroyed not them, but their heathenism (cf. e.g; Psa. 149:6-9 with Jas. 5:20)."

-Joseph Exell - "The Pulpit Commentary"

I think that in our current political climate this message is so necessary for the church. The church is to be salt and light to this world and so we should fight for the most just political outcomes that we can. But we do this knowing two things, no political system, no matter how just, will ever fix the disunity of man. As long as man rules the world in our own strength, there will always be war, famine, poverty, and plague. We need to see the political structures for what they are, agents of preservation in a dying world.

This should help us not to idolize them as well as not to demonize them. As stated before, we seek the most just path forward, but we know that it will never be perfect before Christ. Second, we know that even if what we desire to happen politically should fail, this is not the end. The church has been hopeful and optimistic through the most tyrannical and horrid governments than we could imagine because they believed this simple promise made by Christ:

"And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work."

-Revelation 22:12

We believe that Christ will return and make everything right. This shouldn't move us to apathy about the world, but it also should fill us with hope no matter what is happening in the world. It is this truth that gives us the confidence to fulfill our role on this earth:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen."

-Matthew 28:19-20

We are to make disciples of Christ and trust the salvation of the world to Him and His kingdom. This is the hope, the strength, and the motivation of the church always even to the end of the age.

"For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in

remembrance of Me.” In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes.”

-1 Corinthians 11:23-26