

SESSION 6

# *God's Plans*

NUMBERS 22:22-35

GOD CAN USE ANY MEANS HE CHOOSES TO ACCOMPLISH HIS WILL.



God speaks to us through His Word. He speaks to our hearts or makes holy impressions when we seek Him and His will in prayer. Sometimes, when we hear someone preach, teach, or sing a particular song, we know “those words were for me. That was the answer I needed.” The same can occur in a conversation. We realize that God has delivered a personal message in that moment. We sense an internal confirmation that we have heard from Him.

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WHEN HAVE YOU BEEN SKEPTICAL ABOUT SOMEONE’S CLAIM TO  
SPEAK FOR GOD? WHY?

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## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Forty years earlier, Pharaoh released the Israelites from Egyptian captivity, and God led them “toward the Red Sea along the road of the wilderness” (Ex. 13:18). They crossed through the Red Sea, camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, and sent spies into Canaan. Afraid, they refused to enter the promised land although they stood at its threshold. As a result of their disobedience and lack of faith, God caused them to wander in the wilderness for forty years. The generation of adults died during those decades. Today’s study brings the Israelites back to the threshold of Canaan (Num. 22:1).

Not only were the Israelites a different people because the previous generation had passed away; they also had gained a reputation because of their numbers and strength. Previously, the Israelites had been too afraid of the people in Canaan to enter. Now, they struck fear in the inhabitants of the land. They had been victorious over the Amorites. This intimidated the Moabites and their king, Balak (Num. 14:1-9; 22:2-6).

The Moabites and Israelites had a shared ancestry. The Moabites descended from Lot, Abraham’s nephew. Lot’s two daughters got their father drunk on two consecutive nights. Shamefully, each slept with and became pregnant by Lot. The first daughter named her son “Moab.” The other named her son “Ben-ammi.” The Moabites and Ammonites traced their roots to these sons (Gen. 19:30-38).

Balak was intimidated by the throng of Israelites approaching Moab on their way to Canaan. He decided to enlist the help of Balaam, a medium from Pethor, which was in upper Mesopotamia. Balak wanted Balaam to curse the Israelites so they would not defeat the Moabites. This desire contradicted what God originally told Abraham; He promised to bless those who blessed him and curse those who cursed him. Thus, God was the only One with this power. The question of this study is what would happen when a pagan, Mesopotamian diviner tried to curse the people God had promised to bless?



**22** But God was incensed that **Balaam**<sup>A</sup> was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand on the path to oppose him. Balaam was riding his donkey, and his two servants were with him. **23** When **the donkey saw the angel**<sup>B</sup> of the LORD standing on the path with a drawn sword in his hand, she turned off the path and went into the field. So Balaam hit her to return her to the path. **24** Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow passage between the vineyards, with a stone wall on either side. **25** The donkey saw the angel of the LORD and pressed herself against the wall, squeezing Balaam's foot against it. So he hit her once again. **26** The angel of the LORD went ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn to the right or the left. **27** When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she crouched down under Balaam. So he became furious and beat the donkey with his stick. **28** Then **the LORD opened the donkey's mouth**,<sup>C</sup> and she asked Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?" **29** Balaam answered<sup>D</sup> the donkey, "You made me look like a fool. If I had **a sword in my hand**,<sup>E</sup> I'd kill you now!" **30** But the donkey said, "Am I not the donkey you've ridden all your life until today? Have I ever treated you this way before?" "No," he replied. **31** Then the LORD **opened Balaam's eyes**,<sup>F</sup> and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the path with a drawn sword in his hand. Balaam knelt low and bowed in worship on his face. **32** The angel of the LORD asked him, "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? Look, I came out to oppose you, because I consider what you are doing to be evil. **33** The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If she had not turned away from me, I would have killed you by now and let her live." **34** Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the path to confront me. And now, if it is evil in your sight, I will go back." **35** Then the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but you are to say **only what I tell you**."<sup>G</sup> So Balaam went with Balak's officials.

**A.** A non-Israelite prophet from Mesopotamia (v. 5). An ancient inscription suggests that he was well-known internationally as a "seer" who could speak for various gods. The Bible calls Balaam a "diviner" or "soothsayer" (Josh. 13:22).

**B.** The irony was that the donkey could see spiritual realities that the "seer" could not.

**C.** One of only two animals in the Scriptures to speak with words. The serpent of Genesis 3 opposed God's will, but the donkey was doing God's will. God is not limited in how He speaks.

**D.** In his anger, Balaam did not stop to consider that he was talking with an animal. He had probably spoken to the animal many times in the past without receiving a verbal response.

**E.** Unaware that the donkey had saved him from the angel's "sword," Balaam now wished he had a sword to execute judgment on the donkey.

**F.** The Lord "uncovered" or "opened" Balaam's eyes to see and understand spiritual realities.

**G.** A message devised by Balaam could be swayed by money, but God would not allow that to happen. Balak wanted a curse, but God would only allow blessing. He could fill Balaam's mouth as He had filled the donkey's mouth.

# EXPLORE THE TEXT

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## 1. Obstacles Met

(Num. 22:22-27)

Believers must recognize that obstacles may still arise as we are following God's plans.

- **Why do you think God lets us set out on a path, knowing He is going to change it along the way?**

## 2. Attention Gained

(Num. 22:28-31)

Believers must remain sensitive to God's leading, being intentional to seek Him regularly.

- **When has an unusual experience led you to seek God more intentionally?**

## 3. God's Plan

(Num. 22:32-35)

We should be willing to surrender our plans so we can follow God's plans.

- **What benefits or outcomes can we anticipate when we seek to follow God's plans?**

## Apply the Text

- **Based on this week's Bible passage, what advice would you give to a new believer about how to know when God is directing his or her path? Be ready to share your thoughts with your Bible study group.**

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### KEY DOCTRINE: God the Father

God as Father reigns with providential care over His universe, His creatures, and the flow of the stream of human history according to the purposes of His grace. (See Psalm 103:19; Matthew 10:29-31.)

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### BIBLE SKILL: Use a Bible dictionary to help understand a Bible passage.

Read the article about Balaam in a Bible dictionary. Note that he is mentioned both in the Old Testament (Num. 22-24; 31:8; Josh. 13:22) and New Testament (2 Pet. 2:15; Rev. 2:14). Read each passage that mentions Balaam. Why do you think Balaam did not remain faithful to God? What applications can we draw about our own walk with the Lord?

## TALK IT OUT

**Focus on Numbers 22:38. When was the last time your words got you into trouble?**

As the Israelites journeyed toward Canaan, Balak, king of Moab, became afraid because he didn't have the forces to defend his kingdom against Israel. So he sent for the prophet Balaam to come and curse Israel (Num. 22:6). God told Balaam not to go, for he was not to curse God's people (v. 12). Balak sent for Balaam a second time (v. 17). This time, God permitted Balaam to go, but the prophet could do and say only what God told him (v. 20). Along the way, God became angry with Balaam and the angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him. Apparently, Balaam had spoken words along the way that were unauthorized by God, disobeying the Lord's command to do only what He told him to do or say. The angel reiterated the necessity of Balaam saying only what God told him to say (v. 35).

**What methods has God used to speak to you? How is that similar or different than how He spoke in biblical days?**

Balaam was not a genuine prophet of the Lord but a “prophet for hire” who was willing to compromise truth to gain wealth. He stands as a reminder to us that not everyone who claims to speak for God is actually speaking God’s message.

**With so many voices claiming to speak truth, how are you able to recognize God's voice? What are some practical steps you can do to remain sensitive to God's leadership in life?**

Write “Can I say anything I want?” on a card and place it in a spot where you will see it each day this week.

## Prayer Requests / Notes

## DAILY EXPLORATION



### Day 1: Numbers 22:22-25

***Underline the phrase “the donkey saw the angel” in verses 23 and 25.***

God had earlier told Balaam to go with Balak’s men (v. 20), so why was He “incensed that Balaam was going”? Many interpreters believe God was angry because Balaam had asked Him a second time if he should go when God already had told him not to go (v. 12). Others suggest perhaps Balaam uttered a non-authorized oracle along the way. Evidently, Balaam was well-known throughout the region as one who practiced divination.

Part of the irony in this story is that this lowly “donkey saw the angel.” However, Balaam, the well-respected seer did not see the angel. Some have called him a “blind seer.” The donkey “turned off the path,” likely out of fear. Balaam hit her because he was angry at the stubborn animal and wanted nothing to derail his progress.

When preparing a field, farmers first removed the rocks and stones. Otherwise, plowing and planting were impossible. Farmers stacked the stones and made walls around their fields. Parallel walls formed a “narrow passage” between neighboring vineyards. Trying to walk around the angel, the donkey squeezed Balaam’s foot against the wall. The diviner found himself between a rock and a hard-headed donkey.

**Pray that you would have the spiritual perception to see what God is doing around you.**



### Day 2: Numbers 22:26-27

***Underline “the donkey saw the angel” again in verse 27.***

The angel appeared a third time. Again, it “stood in a narrow place.” This time, though, the text does not mention vineyards. The root for the Hebrew word can refer to a deep place. Some believe the donkey was in a deep and thus narrow furrow in a field. Unable to turn to the right or the left, the donkey did the only thing it could to avoid running into the angel. It “crouched down.”

Balaam was angry the first two times his donkey “acted out.” This time, though, he was furious. The first two times he hit her, presumably with his hand. This time, he lost all control and beat her—not with “a” stick—but “with his stick.” The Hebrew word translated stick can refer to a staff or riding stick. In this context, though, it likely refers to a stick Balaam used in his divination practices. It would have been one of the tools of his trade. The Old Testament mentions this type of stick elsewhere. God accused the unfaithful, saying, “My people consult their wooden idols, and their divining rods inform them” (Hos. 4:12).

Another humorous irony in the story is that Balaam showed that he couldn’t dictate a single donkey’s actions. How did he think he could influence the actions of hundreds of thousands of people?

**Has God ever put a roadblock in your path? What was your response?**



### Day 3: Numbers 22:28-31

***Underline the phrase “the LORD opened” in verses 28 and 31.***

The Creator who had opened the donkey’s eyes to let it see (v. 23) now “opened the donkey’s mouth” to let it speak. The only other time the Old Testament mentions an animal speaking was the snake in the garden of Eden. The snake spoke deception. The donkey, though, spoke truth.

“Balaam answered the donkey.” Instead of being shocked by a talking donkey, Balaam was so caught up in his rage that he didn’t slow down to consider what was happening. He was furious because the donkey had made him “look like a fool.” Balaam had responded to the donkey with fervent emotion (v. 29); the donkey replied with logic. In essence, she asked, “Didn’t my unusual behavior alert you that something was up?” This seems like the natural spot in the conversation for the donkey to tell Balaam about her supernatural encounters. Yet, she did not. She was going to allow the angel to reveal himself to Balaam.

The Creator who opened the donkey’s mouth now opened Balaam’s eyes. Suddenly, he could see what had caused her behavior. The word *then* reminds us that God is at work around us, though we don’t always realize it. The angel stood before Balaam and his donkey. Balaam knelt and bowed facedown in worship. The text offers no indication that the angel had to identify himself. Balaam knew this was a holy moment that called for worship.

**What methods has God used to open your spiritual eyes?**



### Day 4: Numbers 22:32-33

***Consider the reasons Balaam had not perceived God’s hand in this situation.***

The angel addressed Balaam, who could now see him for the first time. The question, “Why have you beaten your donkey these three times?” was the same question the donkey had asked (v. 28). It implies that Balaam should have known better than to treat her as he did. The angel was hinting that Balaam should have suspected God’s hand was at work in his animal’s strange behavior.

The angel affirmed “I came out to oppose you.” The word *oppose* conveys determination; the angel was going to make sure Balaam did not proceed with his journey. God was angry with Balaam and had sent His angel to get His message across. The angel affirmed that Balaam’s actions were “evil” in God’s sight. The original language conveys the idea of Balaam’s running recklessly into a situation God had told him to leave alone.

The angel’s affirmation “the donkey saw me and turned away” reinforced the reason for her apparent misbehavior. She was more perceptive to God’s work than the so-called prophet. The donkey had saved Balaam’s life by avoiding the angel to the best of her ability. Again, the text seems to imply Balaam should have perceived the situation and turned back—or never gone with the delegation after God initially told him not to go.

**In what ways have you struggled to understand what God is doing in your life?  
What are some ways you can be more sensitive to His work in your life?**





## Day 5: Numbers 22:34-35

***Highlight the angel's instruction in verse 35.***

Having heard both his indictment of evil behavior and how close he came to losing his life (vv. 32-33), Balaam responded with a confession: "I have sinned." Having been caught and confronted, he hoped to avert the angel's wrath; he offered to "go back." His offer, though, may not have been sincere or selfless. The condition for his going back was whether the angel thought Balaam's actions were "evil." The angel had already told Balaam his actions were evil (v. 32). Some scholars believe Balaam was making the offer yet still hoped he could continue his journey. This desire indicated his heart had not been changed.

Balaam had been going to Moab with the second delegation Balak had sent. Before Balaam left home, God had instructed him, "get up and go with them, but you must only do what I tell you" (Num. 22:20). Here, the angel gave Balaam almost identical instructions. The difference was Balaam was to "say only" what he had been told to say.

The angel's instructing Balaam to "go with the men" showed that the seer had learned the lesson God had for him. Balaam could not dictate the donkey's actions. He would not get the final say, God would. The Lord could stop Balaam any time He chose. And He could use any means to convey His message. After all that God had done to get His message to Balaam, the seer would obey exactly what God had instructed. Balaam was ready to continue his journey to Moab.

**How will you demonstrate your willingness to surrender your plans to God's plans?**

## APPLY THE TEXT

In examining your own life, do you see a place where God has placed an obstacle and attempted to direct you with a new plan? What changes do you need to make to continue moving forward with God's new direction?

## JOURNAL

