



God's Plan

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

Scripture Passage: Numbers 22:22-35 Memory Verse: Numbers 22:38

The Bible tells us that God is able to do more than we could ever imagine (Eph. 3:20). God's ways and thoughts are far beyond us, just as the heavens are high above the earth (Isa. 55:8-9). He guides the universe and knows all the stars by name (40:25-26). By His miraculous power, He humbled the Egyptians and rescued His people from four centuries of bondage (Ex. 12:40-41).

God's Word recalls His miracles on behalf of His people as they journeyed through the wilderness (16:1-36; 17:1-7). And it speaks of His intimate, personal work in the lives of individuals like Hagar and Ishmael (Gen. 21:14-21), Joseph (41:37-41), and even a young virgin named Mary in the little town of Nazareth (Luke 1:26-38).

As you prepare for this session, reflect on the infinite reach of God's sovereignty, power, and authority. Remember that no challenge that comes our way ever stymies Him. Remind adults that the Lord is always at work to accomplish His purposes and can use any means He chooses to do so. Urge them to consider how He might want to use them, just as you consider how He might want to use you.



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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. (PSG, p. 55)

When have you been skeptical about someone’s claim to speak for God? Why?



Understand the Context (Numbers 22:2–25:18)

Balak, king of Moab, heard about Israel’s victory over the Amorites, and his people were quite concerned (Num. 22:2-4). So, he sent messengers to Balaam, a diviner who lived near the Euphrates River, and asked him to come and curse the Israelites (22:5-6). When Balaam inquired of God, the Lord told him not to go with the Moabite leaders (22:7-14). The officials returned and informed Balak that Balaam had refused to come.

Balak then sent another delegation and offered Balaam an even greater reward (22:15-17). Again, Balaam inquired of the Lord. This time, the Lord told him to go. So, Balaam saddled his donkey and accompanied Moab’s leaders (22:18-21).

However, the Lord was angry at Balaam and sent His angel to oppose him with a drawn sword (22:22). While the donkey could see the angel in the pathway, Balaam could not and wondered why his animal had behaved so erratically (22:23-27). The Lord then enabled the donkey to speak, and He also opened Balaam’s eyes to see the angel before him (22:28-31). Balaam repented and offered to return to his homeland (22:32-34). The angel told Balaam to continue to Moab, but he must speak only God’s words there (22:35).

Once Balaam arrived, Balak summoned some of Moab’s leaders to hear Balaam’s curse (22:36-41). At Balaam’s request, Balak prepared seven altars with sacrifices on them; but when Balaam began to speak, he actually blessed the Israelites instead of cursing them (23:1-10).

As one might expect, Balak was upset and suggested they gather in a different location (23:11-17). But a change in scenery did not change the results. Balaam again spoke only words of blessing over Israel (23:18-24). God would not take back His promise to bless Israel, and Balaam could not either.

Finally, the frustrated king took Balaam to the top of Peor for a third opportunity to curse the Israelites (23:25-30). There, the Spirit of God came on Balaam, and he again blessed Israel (24:1-9). Balak protested, but Balaam insisted that he could speak only what God commanded him (24:10-13). Balaam then uttered one final prophecy that described Israel’s future dominance over Moab (24:14-25).

Sadly, many Israelites soon began to compromise spiritually with the Moabites (25:1-3). The Lord ordered judgment against all Israel’s leaders for allowing this to happen (25:4-5). Phinehas, Aaron’s grandson, executed God’s judgment against an Israelite man who took a Midianite woman into his tent. God blessed the zeal of Phinehas (25:6-13) and warned Moses to judge the Midianites. More trouble would come to God’s people if they failed to address the issue of spiritual compromise (25:16-18).

As you read Numbers 22:22-35, take note of how God chose to accomplish His will. (PSG, p. 56)

ENGAGE



PREPARE: On a focal wall, display **Pack Item 1** (*Map: From Kadesh-Barnea to Moab*). Make several copies of **Pack Item 11** (*Handout: Balaam: All We Know*) and **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Praying Scripture in Numbers, Deuteronomy*). Secure several sticky notes. Address note cards to each member of the class for the “After the Session” activity (Leader Guide, p. 78).

READ:

Direct adults to form groups of two or three and to read the opening paragraph (PSG, p. 55). Encourage them to share experiences when they sensed God speaking to them. After a few minutes, allow a few volunteers to share their experiences.

ASK:

When have you been skeptical about someone’s claim to speak for God? Why? (PSG, p. 55)

EXPLAIN:

Use **Pack Item 1** (*Map: From Kadesh-Barnea to Moab*) to explain that the Israelites had moved from Kadesh-barnea to the Plains of Moab across the Jordan River from Jericho. Summarize this background from page 70 of the Leader Guide:

“Balak, king of Moab, heard about Israel’s victory over the Amorites, and his people were quite concerned (Num. 22:2-4). So, he sent messengers to Balaam, a diviner who lived near the Euphrates River, and asked him to come and curse the Israelites (22:5-6). When Balaam inquired of God, the Lord told him not to go with the Moabite leaders (22:7-14). The officials returned and informed Balak that Balaam had refused to come. Balak then sent another delegation and offered Balaam an even greater reward (22:15-17). Again, Balaam inquired of the Lord. This time, the Lord told him to go. So, Balaam saddled his donkey and accompanied Moab’s leaders (22:18-21).”



Group Activity Option

Music

Secure a copy of the song, “Goodness of God.” Play the song as the group listens or sings along. After the song, encourage volunteers to share times when they recognized that God had been faithful to pursue them with His goodness. Explain that this session is about a time when God used unusual methods to accomplish His plan for His people.

Obstacles Met (Num. 22:22-27)

22 But God was incensed that Balaam 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 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.

(vv. 22-23) The expression *God was incensed* literally means “God’s face became hot” and commonly refers to God’s wrath in the Old Testament. God was angry because •*Balaam was going* with the leaders of Moab. This may seem surprising since God had told Balaam to go with them (v. 20). Many interpreters believe God was angry because Balaam had asked Him a second time if he should go (v. 12). Others suggest Balaam uttered an unauthorized oracle after God told him to go.

Whatever the case, an unidentified *angel of the LORD*, God’s personal messenger, intercepted Balaam as he traveled. The word translated *oppose* is related to the name “Satan” and has the sense of acting as an adversary. Here, God’s messenger stood against Balaam to redirect him, not to tempt him into sin.

The prophet’s *donkey saw the angel* standing in the roadway, but God prevented Balaam from seeing him (v. 31). Since the messenger stood with *a drawn sword*, the donkey left the *path* and ventured into a *field*. This was likely the easiest way for the animal to avoid confrontation and save both its life and the life of its master. In response, *Balaam hit* her, not grasping the significance of why she had strayed.

(vv. 24-25) The path went on through *a narrow passage between the vineyards*. This time, the angel’s position did not give the donkey the option of turning into the field (v. 23). The path featured *a stone wall on either side*, which would further inhibit the donkey’s maneuvering. Again, we must remember that Balaam did not see *the angel of the LORD*, so he remained confused.

The donkey did not feel threatened enough to avoid the angel altogether and sensed she might have just enough room to get through the passage. So, she *pressed herself against the wall*; but, as she did, she ended up *squeezing Balaam’s foot against* the wall. Again, *he hit her* so she would return to the path.

(vv. 26-27) *The angel* moved farther down the path, where he completely restricted the donkey’s options. At this point, *there was no room to turn to the right or the left*. It’s not clear from the text why the donkey could not move, but it is apparent that it had reached a dead end. This was the place where the Lord would confront Balaam.

When the donkey recognized that she could not run away or attack, she simply *crouched down under Balaam*. The word “crouched” also appears metaphorically in Genesis 4:7, where God warned Cain that sin was “crouching” at his door. Here, it is used in the literal sense. Balaam’s donkey laid down on the ground.

Balaam *became furious* (the same expression used of God in v. 22) at the donkey’s behavior this third time. He again *beat the donkey*, probably harder and with more blows than before. He was determined to correct her.

But, as Balaam soon discovered, he was the one in need of correction.



APPLICATION POINT: Believers must recognize that obstacles may still arise as we are following God’s plans.

EXAMINE:

Group adults into teams of three or four. Distribute copies of **Pack Item 11** (*Handout: Balaam: All We Know*) to each person and direct the teams to review the content of the article. After a few minutes, encourage volunteers to share things that stuck out to them from the article.

READ:

Enlist a volunteer to read aloud Numbers 22:22-27 as the group listens for how Balaam’s actions compare with his donkey’s actions.

SUMMARIZE:

Briefly summarize verses 22-27. Note how the third encounter ended by reading this content from page 58 of the PSG:

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 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. . . . This time, [Balaam] lost all control and beat her—not with “a” stick—but with his stick.

ASK:

Why do you think God lets us set out on a path, knowing He is going to change it along the way? (PSG, p. 58)



Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

Direct adults to complete the Bible Skill activity on page 62 of the PSG. To supplement the information from the Bible dictionary, provide copies of **Pack Item 11** (*Handout: Balaam: All We Know*). After a few minutes, allow volunteers to report on what they learned and why those facts are significant. Briefly lead adults through the questions included in the Bible Skill activity.

Attention Gained (Num. 22:28-31)

28 Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and she asked Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?" **29** Balaam answered the donkey, "You made me look like a fool. If I had a sword in my hand, 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, 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.

(v. 28) Until that moment, only the donkey had seen the angel and recognized the danger Balaam faced. Now **the LORD** took the encounter to a new level as He **opened the donkey's mouth**, enabling her to speak! She promptly asked the oracle a question: **What have I done?** She had veered from the path, and he struck her (v. 23). She had squeezed by the angel, and he had struck her (v. 25). Now, she had crouched down because the angel blocked her path, which resulted in another round of blows from her master (v. 27). All she had done was save Balaam's life **three times**, and he had responded by beating her.

(v. 29) **Balaam answered the donkey**, apparently not stopping to think he had never before heard words from his animal. The expression translated **made me look like a fool** can denote dealing ruthlessly or wantonly with someone. It also occurs in Exodus 10:2 to describe how the Lord made a mockery of Egypt through His signs and plagues.

Balaam may have thought his servants and the Moabite delegation who rode with him (vv. 21-22) were thinking less of him because he could not control his own donkey. Whatever his thoughts, his frustration had reached a boiling point. Balaam said he even would have killed his donkey had he had a **sword** with him.

(v. 30) **The donkey** replied by appealing to their long-term relationship. She had served him faithfully for many years. He had **ridden** her his entire life, so her question **Have I ever treated you this way before?** challenged Balaam to think back over the course of their relationship.

Balaam had to admit the answer was no. Still, he likely wondered why she had been so uncooperative. With God's help, he was about to discover that she saw and understood the situation much better than he did. Everything she had done had been for his benefit. And without her help, things would have ended tragically for Balaam.

(v. 31) The expression **the LORD opened Balaam's eyes** generally parallels the Lord's opening the donkey's mouth in verse 28. However, here the word translated "opened" literally means "uncovered." The Lord removed the barrier and allowed Balaam to see the **angel of the LORD** for the first time. The omnipotent God who can allow donkeys to talk can also remove the blinders and let wayward prophets see things from His perspective.

The angel again was **standing in the path with a drawn sword**, just as when he had appeared initially to the donkey. The expression is repeated here from verse 23, highlighting that Balaam finally saw what his donkey had seen from the beginning. The animal he had threatened to kill had kept him from being killed by the angel.

In response to his new view of the situation, **Balaam knelt low**. The verb often denotes physically humbling oneself before God in **worship**, as here (Gen. 24:26,48; 2 Chron. 20:18). However, it also can describe people bowing to give homage to a human official of rank, as Joseph's brothers did before him (Gen. 43:28) and as Bathsheba did before King David (1 Kings 1:16,31).

After going his own way and taking out his frustrations on his donkey, Balaam finally recognized the presence of God's messenger and responded appropriately.

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.)



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

READ:

Enlist a volunteer to read aloud Numbers 22:28-31 as the rest of the group considers the humor in this story.

REFLECT:

Direct attention to the "Key Doctrine" on page 59 of the PSG. Encourage the group to suggest ways God demonstrated providential care for both the donkey and Balaam.

DISCUSS:

Highlight two "shifts" in the story: God opened Balaam's eyes as He had opened the donkey's mouth, and the donkey Balaam threatened to kill had saved him from being killed. Lead adults to discuss why God might choose to work through such unusual means to communicate with Balaam.

EXPLAIN:

Summarize the following content from page 60 of the PSG:

"After not one but two invitations from King Balak, after traveling many days and hundreds of miles, and after having to contend with an uncooperative talking donkey, then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes. The word 'then' reminds us that God is at work around us, and we don't always realize it. The Creator who opened the donkey's mouth now opened Balaam's eyes. Suddenly, he could see what had caused her behavior."

ASK:

When has an unusual experience led you to seek God more intentionally? (PSG, p. 60)

God's Plan (Num. 22:32-35)

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.” So Balaam went with Balak’s officials.

(v. 32) *The angel of the LORD* addressed Balaam, who could now see him for the first time. His question (*Why have you beaten your donkey these three times?*) echoes the donkey’s query. It also 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” is the same word that occurred in verse 22. God was angry with Balaam and had sent His angel to get His message across to this wayward diviner. 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.

(v. 33) The angel’s affirmation *the donkey saw me and turned away* reinforced the reason for her apparent misbehavior. Again, she was more perceptive to God’s work than the so-called prophet. As noted, the donkey had saved Balaam’s life by avoiding the angel to the best of her ability. The text does seem 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.

(v. 34) Balaam responded by confessing his sin. The Hebrew word for *sinned* (*chata*) literally means to “miss the mark,” and Balaam indeed had done that. However, once he saw the situation for what it was, he acknowledged that he had been moving in the wrong direction.

Balaam’s rationale was that he had not seen the angel *standing in the path*. This suggests that he believed he acted in ignorance. Nevertheless, the angel’s accusation (v. 32) implied that Balaam should have recognized God’s presence earlier in the situation.

At any rate, Balaam now stated his desire to follow God’s leading: *I will go back*. He had ignored God’s initial directive (v. 12), but now he had come face-to-face with the Lord’s messenger. This encounter helped him realize the magnitude of his disobedience. In response, he offered to make the situation right and not go to Moab. His eyes were finally open to the reality of the situation. He had failed to heed God’s instruction the first time, but he would not do so again.

(v. 35) The angel told Balaam to *go with the men*. Now that the Lord had gotten Balaam’s attention, He would use him to glorify Himself before Balak. However, the angel insisted that Balaam *say only what I tell you*. Balaam was not to prophesy on his own initiative, but only the words God gave him.

The angel did not spell out negative consequences for adding to or subtracting from God’s message. Perhaps that wasn’t necessary since Balaam had chosen to heed God’s directive. In any case, *Balaam went with Balak’s officials* and was left to wonder what message God would give him. He knew Balak wanted him to curse Israel, but he probably suspected God had other plans.

Praying Scripture

Numbers 22:34-35

Spend time praying Scripture using Numbers 22:34-35. Read the verses, then respond to these questions:

- How does God reveal Himself in these verses?
- How should I respond to what He reveals?

Example: Ask God to help you avoid the blindness of Balaam and to remain sensitive to His presence and His leading in your life.



APPLICATION POINT: We should be willing to surrender our plans so we can follow God’s plans.

READ:

Read aloud Numbers 22:32-35 as the group focuses on Balaam’s response to the angel.

EXAMINE:

Direct adults to work in pairs to read the content for verses 32-33 (PSG, p. 61) and to determine why God called Balaam’s actions evil. After a few minutes, allow volunteers to share. Highlight that the seer’s actions proved that his “heart was not right” (PSG, p. 61). Encourage the group to discuss what motivated Balaam—and how seeing the angel changed him.

REVIEW:

Share the following content from page 62 of the PSG:

The condition for [Balaam’s] 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 he still hoped he could continue his task and journey. This desire indicated his heart had not been changed.

EXPLAIN:

Emphasize that the angel restated the original directions from God for Balaam to say only what God told him to say.

ASK:

What benefits or outcomes can we anticipate when we seek to follow God’s plans? (PSG, p. 62)

PRAY:

Distribute copies of **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Praying Scripture in Numbers, Deuteronomy*). Encourage adults to pray Numbers 22:34-35 using the prompts on page 76 of the Leader Guide.



Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: GPS

Display a paper road map on a focal wall. Direct adults to open the GPS app on their phones. Point out that before smart phones became popular, most people used paper maps in their cars. Ask: **How often do you use the map and GPS app? What are the differences between them?** If no one mentions it, suggest that a helpful feature of the app is rerouting to avoid long delays or when you’ve missed a turn. Point out that the angel was an unexpected roadblock for Balaam, but he also provided real-time corrections once Balaam’s eyes were opened.

CHALLENGE

SUMMARIZE:

Read these application points from Apply the Text on page 63 in the *Personal Study Guide*:

- *Believers must recognize that obstacles may arise as we are following God's plans.*
- *Believers must remain sensitive to God's leading, being intentional to seek Him regularly.*
- *We should be willing to surrender our plans so we can follow God's plans.*

EVALUATE:

Distribute a sticky note to each adult and direct them to create two columns labeled *LOA* (level of agreement) and *WTI* (willingness to implement). Guide adults to rank from 1 to 5 (low to high) their level of agreement with and willingness to implement each of the three application points.

DISCUSS:

Direct the group to read the first set of questions on page 63 of the PSG. After a moment of silence, guide a discussion encouraging adults to share advice they would give to new believers for recognizing God's leading in their lives.

PRAY:

Review the "Praying Scripture" prompts on page 76 of the Leader Guide and challenge adults to continue praying for eyes that are open to see the Lord at work around you. Close the session in prayer, asking God to also give them ears to hear His voice each day.

AFTER THE SESSION

As the group dismisses, distribute note-cards addressed to each person in the group. Make sure each adult has a card with someone else's name and information. Guide them to pray for the person to whom their card is addressed and to write them a note of encouragement during the week. Suggest they encourage one another to continue looking for God's presence and work in their lives each day. Remind them that God can use any method He wants to accomplish His purposes.

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