



God's Plans

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

NUMBERS 22:22-35

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.



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

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

NUMBERS 22:2–25:18

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?



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

EXPLORE THE TEXT

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.

VERSES 22-25

- Balak sent a second group of officials northward to secure Balaam's help. Following God's instructions, Balaam had refused to go to Moab with the first delegation. This time, God instructed Balaam to go with the men to Moab.

From Moab to Pethor was over 400 miles; each one-way trip would have taken three to four weeks. Thus, this story spans several months. How Balak knew Balaam is unclear. Evidently, Balaam was well-known throughout the region as one who practiced divination.

If God had told Balaam to go (v. 20), why was He *incensed that •Balaam was going*? The Bible does not say. 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.

The term *angel of the LORD*, used primarily in the Old Testament, typically referred to God Himself when He conveyed a brief message to a particular person. In these occurrences, He sometimes took on a human appearance. Other times, the term refers to a powerful angel working in God's stead. The angel's action

and sword are reminders of the cherubim God used to block the entrance to the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:24).

Part of the comedic irony in the 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.

VERSES 26-27

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?



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



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.)

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.**

VERSES 28-30

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. Only He could have done that. Our Creator is the One who put the “bark” in the dog, the “moo” in the cow, and the “bray” in the donkey to begin with. He can certainly control a voice.

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 only 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.

Balaam was furious because the donkey had made him ***look like a fool***. He was so mortified that he wished he had a sword so he could kill his donkey. This wish revealed more than Balaam meant for it to. Proverbs teaches, “The righteous cares about his animal’s health” (Prov. 12:10). His out-of-control anger and desire to slay his donkey gave evidence of Balaam’s unrighteous heart.

Balaam was probably concerned about what Balak’s dignitaries would say about him when they reached Moab. Would they report that Balaam could not control this stubborn and second-rate form of transportation? That he lost his temper and self-control? That he carried on a conversation with a donkey?

This donkey, which Balaam had ridden all his life, understood what her owner wanted. Despite that, the donkey overtly disregarded Balaam's wishes this third time.

Still, Balaam showed no indication of being surprised by his conversation with his donkey. 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?" Balaam had to admit his donkey had a point.

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. This verse contains the donkey's last words.

VERSE 31

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, though 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.

The word ***angel*** means "messenger." The divine being with a message from heaven stood before Balaam and his donkey. Again, the ***sword*** was present, the same type of weapon Balaam said he wished he had so he could have slain his obstinate donkey.

Balaam knelt and bowed face-down in worship. The text offers no indication that the angel had to identify himself. Despite that, Balaam knew this was a holy moment that called for worship.



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

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.

VERSES 32-33

The angel asked the same question the donkey had asked: Why had Balaam beaten the donkey these three times (see v. 28)? Then, clarifying that the donkey was not the one halting Balaam, the angel said, ***I came out to oppose you***. The noun form of the Hebrew word translated *oppose* refers to an adversary or enemy, someone who stands against—or in opposition to—someone. The word conveys determination; the angel was going to make sure Balaam did not proceed with his journey.

The angel said he considered Balaam’s actions to be ***evil***. The word *evil* can carry with it the meaning of being reckless or even perverse. Balaam’s heart was not right. Then the angel explained what had happened in the journey. His words, ***the donkey saw me***, answered why the donkey behaved as she had and why she ***turned away . . . these three times***.

The angel’s next statement had to have shocked Balaam. The only reason he was still alive was because of what the donkey had done. He owed his life to this lowly animal he had wanted to slay. Had the situation not occurred like this, the animal would have lived and Balaam would not have. How close was Balaam to meeting an untimely end? Closer than he thought. The angel showed up—not only with a sword—but with a drawn sword (v. 31).

VERSES 34-35

When Balaam saw the angel, he “knelt low and bowed in worship on his face” (v. 31). 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***. He did not clarify, though, what his sin was. Was his sin not comprehending the angel’s presence earlier? Was it the way he took out his anger on his donkey? Was it because he was determined to take this journey despite God’s prohibition?

Having been caught and confronted, Balaam hoped to avert the angel’s wrath; he offered to ***go back*** to retrace his steps. 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 he still hoped he could continue his task and journey. This desire indicated his heart had not been changed.

Balaam had been going to Moab with the second delegation that 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. He could not fool God. The Lord could stop Balaam any time He chose. And He could use any means to convey His message, even speaking through a donkey if needed. After all that God had done to get His message to Balaam, the seer would obey exactly what God had instructed. Having heard the angel, Balaam was ready to continue his journey to Moab.



What benefits or outcomes can we anticipate when we seek to follow God’s plans?



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?

APPLY THE TEXT

- + 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.

 **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.**

 **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?**



Memorize Numbers 22:38.

Prayer Needs