

OT LESSON 16
**“I CANNOT GO BEYOND THE WORD OF THE
LORD”**

Ted L. Gibbons

INTRODUCTION: I am going to include an article written by Elder McConkie here as an introduction. I recommend that you read it along with these materials. It is wonderful. Some of the concepts will be repeated in the lesson I have written, but the “second witness” will be worth the double exposure.



Let me tell you the story of a prophet, in some respects a very great prophet, but one “who loved the wages of unrighteousness,” who “was rebuked for his iniquity” in a most strange and unusual way, and whose actions (which included the uttering of great and true prophecies) were described by another prophet in another day as “madness.”

This is a true story, a dramatic story; one with a great lesson for all members of the Church; one that involves seeing God, receiving revelation, and facing a destroying angel in whose hand was the sword of vengeance. It includes the account of how the Lord delivered a message to the prophet in a way that, as far as we know, has never been duplicated in the entire history of the world.

As we study the events involved, suppose we seek answers to these questions: Why did the Lord permit (or did he direct?) the strange series of events? What are “the wages of unrighteousness”? And how could a prophet who sought such remain in tune with “the spirit of God” and proclaim great truths, including one of our most marvelous Messianic prophecies?

But even more important: What lesson are we expected to learn from the intermixture of both good and bad conduct shown forth by this ancient representative of the Lord?

Now let us turn to the story, with an open mind, seeking the lesson it teaches us. And as we do so, please keep in mind that everything I have so far or shall hereafter put in quote marks is copied from the Bible, except in one instance where help is sought from a passage of latter-day revelation.

Our story took place on the plains of Moab near Jericho; the time was 1451 B.C.; the chief participants were Balak, king of the Moabites, and Balaam, a prophet from the land of Midian. Israel’s hosts, numbering in the millions, had just devastated the land of the Amorites and were camped on the borders of Moab. Fear and anxiety filled the

hearts of the people of Moab and Balak their king. Would they also be overrun and slaughtered by these warriors of Jehovah?

So Balak sent the elders and princes of his nation to Balaam, "with the rewards of divination in their hand," to hire him to come and curse Israel. In Balak's name they said: "Behold, there is a people come out from Egypt: behold, they cover the face of the earth, and they abide over against me:

"Come now therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people; for they are too mighty for me: peradventure I shall prevail, that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land: for I wot that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed."

Anxious to gain the riches they offered him, Balaam invited them to lodge with him that night while he inquired of the Lord and sought permission to curse Israel. That night "God came unto Balaam" and said: "Thou shalt not go with them; thou shalt not curse the people: for they are blessed."

Next morning Balaam said to the princes of Balak: "Get you into your land: for the Lord refuseth to give me leave to go with you."

Thereupon Balak sent more honorable and noble princes than the first and they said to Balaam: "Thus saith Balak the son of Zippor, Let nothing, I pray thee, hinder thee from coming unto me:

"For I will promote thee unto very great honour, and I will do whatsoever thou sayest unto me: come therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people.

"And Balaam answered and said unto the servants [page 5] of Balak, If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God, to do less or more."

And yet, still anxious to receive the riches and honors offered by the king, Balaam lodged his visitors and importuned the Lord for permission to go with them and curse Israel.

"And God came unto Balaam at night, and said unto him, If the men come to call thee, rise up, and go with them; but yet the word which I shall say unto thee, that shalt thou do."

After gaining this permission Balaam "saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab."

Now note: The Lord had given Balaam permission to go, and yet the scripture says: "And God's anger was kindled because he went: and the angel of the Lord stood in the

way for an adversary against him.”

As Balaam rode along, “the ass saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand.” Three times the dumb beast turned aside, crushing Balaam’s foot against a wall and falling down under him. In anger the prophet “smote the ass with a staff.

“And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times?

“And Balaam said unto the ass, Because thou hast mocked me: I would there were a sword in mine hand, for now would I kill thee.

“And the ass said unto Balaam, Am not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden ever since I was thine unto this day? was I ever wont to do so unto thee? And he said, Nay.

“Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face.”

After rebuking and counseling Balaam, the angel yet said: “Go with the men: but only the word that I shall speak unto thee, that thou shalt speak.”

When they met, Balak renewed his promise “to promote” Balaam “to honour,” and the prophet responded: “Have I now any power at all to say any thing? the word that God putteth in my mouth, that shall I speak.”

Balak then offered sacrifices, and at the visiting prophet’s request built seven altars upon which Balaam also sacrificed, obviously pleading with the Lord for [page 6] permission to curse Israel and receive the honors offered by the king of the Moabites. But with it all Balaam promised that if “the Lord will come to meet me,” then “whatsoever he sheweth me I will tell thee.”

“And God met Balaam,” and told him what to say, which he then proclaimed in the presence of all the princes of Moab: “How shall I curse, whom God hath not cursed? or how shall I defy, whom the Lord hath not defied?

“For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him: Lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.

“Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!”

Balak was angry, but Balaam remained true to his trust, saying, “Must I not take heed to speak that which the Lord hath put in my mouth?”

Then they went through the whole process again. Sacrifices were offered; the Lord was importuned; but the result was the same.

“God is not a man,” Balaam said, “that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?”

“Behold, I have received commandment to bless: and he hath blessed; and I cannot reverse it.”

Then he continued, “Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, neither is there any divination against Israel: according to this time it shall be said of Jacob and of Israel, What hath God wrought!”

When Balak yet complained, Balaam replied: “Told not I thee, saying, All that the Lord speaketh, that I must do?”

And yet at the King's request the prophet still sought to curse Israel. Further sacrifices were offered; again pleading entreaties ascended to the Lord; and again the answer was the same. “The spirit of God came upon him,” and he prophesied with power and force of the greatness of Israel, concluding with the statement, “Blessed is he that blesseth thee, and cursed is he that curseth thee.”

“And Balak's anger was kindled against Balaam, and he smote his hands together: and Balak said unto Balaam, I called thee to curse mine enemies, and, behold, thou hast altogether blessed them these three times.

“Therefore now flee thou to thy place: I thought to promote thee unto great honour; but, lo, the Lord hath kept thee back from honour.”

But Balaam, fixed in his purpose to deliver only “that message that the Lord revealed to him, said: “Spake I not also to thy messengers which thou sentest unto me, saying,

“If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the commandment of the Lord, to do either good or bad of mine own mind; but what the Lord saith, that will I speak?”

Then, while the Spirit still rested upon him, Balaam gave this great Messianic prophecy: “I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel.”

In spite of all this, the record recites that Balaam “taught” Balak “to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication,” and shortly thereafter, while aligned against Israel in the camps of the Midianites, he was “slain with the sword.”

The full account of these events is found in Numbers 22:23; 24; 25; 31:8; 2 Peter 2:15–16; Jude 1:11; and Revelations 2:14. [Num. 22:23; Num. 24; Num. 25; Num. 31:8; 2 Pet. 2:15–16; Rev. 2:14]

What a story this is! Here is a prophet of God who is firmly committed to declare only what the Lord of heaven directs. There does not seem to be the slightest doubt in his mind about the course he should pursue. He represents the Lord, and neither a house full of gold and silver nor high honors offered by the king can sway him from his determined course, which has been charted for him by that God whom he serves.

But greed for wealth and lust for honor beckon him. How marvelous it would be to be rich and powerful—as well as having the prophetic powers that already are his.

Perhaps the Lord would let him compromise his standards and have some worldly prosperity and power as well as a testimony of the gospel. Of course he knew the gospel was true, as it were, but why should he be denied the things his political file leader could confer?

I wonder how often some of us get our direction from the Church and then, Balaam-like, plead for some worldly rewards and finally receive an answer which says, in effect, If you are determined to be a millionaire or to gain this or that worldly honor, go ahead, with the understanding that you will continue to serve the Lord. Then we wonder why things don't work out for us as well as they would have done if we had put first in our lives the things of God's kingdom?

What are the rewards of unrighteousness? Do they not include seeking for worldly things when these run counter to the interests of the Church?

And don't we all know people who, though they were once firm and steadfast in testimony, are now opposing the Lord's purposes and interests on earth because money and power have twisted their judgment of what should or should not be?

Balaam, the prophet, inspired and mighty as he once was, lost his soul in the end because he set his heart on the things of this world rather than the riches of eternity.

What a wealth of meaning there is in these inspired words of Joseph Smith, words addressed to people who have testimonies but want to mingle the things of this world with them: "Behold, there are many called, but few are chosen. And why are they not chosen?

"Because their heads are set so much upon the things of this world, and aspire to the honors of men, that they do not learn this one lesson—

"That the rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven, and that the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the

principles of righteousness.

“That they may be conferred upon us, it is true; but when we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man.

“Behold, ere he is aware, he is left unto himself, to kick against the pricks, to persecute the saints, and to fight against God. ...

“Hence many are called, but few are chosen.” (D&C 121:34–38, 40.)

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1. BALAAM REFUSES BALAK’S OFFER OF REWARDS IN EXCHANGE FOR CURSING ISRAEL.

Israel arrived at the plains of Moab after having stomped the stuffing out of Arad and his Canaanites (Numbers 21:1-3), Sihon and his Amorites (Numbers 21:21-24), and Og and the people of Bashan (Numbers 21:33-35). The Moabites were terrified (“sore afraid”), according to the record (Numbers 22:3).

Balak, the king, knew a serious threat when he saw one, and he knew that his armies and gods were no match for the armies and God of the Israelites. he had no doubt heard the stories of the plagues in Egypt and the dividing of the Red Sea and the rivers of water in the desert. In desperation he sent for a man who worshipped the same God as the Israelites but who was not, evidently, a part of the nation of Israel then on the move. He sent for a man whose power and accomplishments had captured even the king's attention. He sent messengers to bring Balaam to him, “for,” he said, “I wot [know] that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed.” (Numbers 22:6).

Messengers delivered Balak’s message and offered the “rewards of divination” to this man whom Bruce R. McConkie tells us was a Prophet of Jehovah. Balaam invited them to stay the night while he enquired to know the will of the Lord in this matter. During the night “God came to Balaam” and, after a brief discussion, said, “Thou shalt not go with them; thou shalt not curse the people: for they are blessed.” (Num. 22:12.)

Next morning Balaam told his visitors, “the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian,” to go home. He could do nothing for them. But Balak faced the utter destruction of his nation from the threat within his borders, and he had no other option. He was desperate. He sent again, this time princes, and more of them, and more honorable than the lowly elders sent the first time. And they came with a better offer as well. Balak promised Balaam that he would “promote [him] unto very great honor, and I will

do whatsoever thou sayest unto me.” (Num. 22:17)

Balaam’s response was magnificent. “If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I can not go beyond the word of the Lord my God to do less or more.” (Num. 22:18). This is where the story ought to end. The messengers of Moab ought to depart and the Prophet Balaam ought to pass into obscurity, probably without a single verse of recognition in the scriptures.

THE LORD SHOWS THE DANGER OF BALAAM’S STUBBORN INSISTENCE ON HIS OWN WILL.

But the does not end here. Balaam adds a calamitous postscript to his declaration of loyalty to the Lord, and the result is that he gets two or three chapters in Numbers and a mention in several other books in the Bible. This postscript is the first inkling we have that all is not exactly right in his heart. “I pray you, tarry here also this night, that I may know what the Lord will say unto me *more*.” (Num. 22:19, *emphasis added*) I have a hard time finding *any* ambiguity in what the Lord has already said. Balaam’s desire to ask again for permission to make the journey to Moab suggests that he is hoping for a different answer than the one he already received.

It is difficult not to think of Martin Harris and Joseph Smith and the 116 pages at this point. And as might be expected, the Lord gives Balaam permission to make the trip. “Rise up, and go with them, *if thou wilt* [the JST adds the part in italics]. But the conditions are explicit: “But yet the word which I shall say unto thee, that shalt thou do.” (Numbers 20:20.)

Balaam departs then for Moab, riding on the back of the most remarkable donkey. But something was terribly wrong. Jude tells us that Balaam “ran greedily after . . . reward” (Jude 1:11). The Lord was evidently concerned by the desire he could see in Balaam’s heart to find a way to curse Israel and get the dough. He sent an angel to block the way. Three times the donkey saw the angel and Balaam did not. This is some indication that Balaam’s concern with his own desires had already eroded his spirituality to some degree. Three times the donkey saw the angel in the roadway with a drawn sword. Three times the donkey took evasive action. Three times Balaam was flustered and furious. Three times he beat the animal. Then the Lord opened the donkey’s mouth.

There is no comment here about the reaction of Balaam. The story focuses on the content of the message, not its impact. But it would delightful to have even one verse describing what Balaam thought when the donkey said, “What have I ever done unto thee?” (Num. 22:28) Just imagine your own pet Dalmatian complaining, “How come I never get anything but Gravy Train?”

I cannot help feeling that there is a lesson here in the fact that Balaam is on a **donkey**. Donkeys are renowned for their stubbornness, and Balaam beats his *for refusing to go*

the way his master wants him to go. But this is precisely what Balaam is doing. This is a thing all of us have a tendency to do sometimes. “What are you doing,” we might ask of someone engaged in a behavior we believe to be contrary to the commandments. And the usually unspoken answer might be, “I’m doing what God would want me to do if he knew what I know.” How often do we insist on our own way, our own conclusions, our own desires, even when the word of the Lord has come to us in perfect clarity. It is not that we *ride* a donkey to do evil, but that we *are* the donkey!

But to continue; the Lord opens Balaam’s eyes and he sees the angel who says, “I went out to withstand thee, because thy way is perverse” before the Lord. (22:32). Balaam, now flat on his tummy and humble enough to obey any command (an angel with a sword will have that effect) offers to return home at once. Again comes the instruction: “Go . . . but only the word that I shall speak unto thee, that thou shalt speak. So Balaam went . . .” (22:35).

BALAAM REFUSES TO CURSE ISRAEL.

Balaam seems to have gotten the message clearly this time. As he views Israel, he three times offers sacrifices, and three times gives Israel, instead of cursings, blessings. Balak watches all of this. (23:8-24:9).

And Balak’s anger was kindled against Balaam . . . and he said unto Balaam, I called thee to curse mine enemies, and, behold, thou has altogether blessed them these three times. Therefore now flee thou to thy place: I thought to promote thee unto great honor, but lo, *the Lord hath kept thee back from honor.* (24:10, *emphasis added*)

“The Lord hath kept thee back from honor.” Would the Lord really do that? Of course he would, and as often and as emphatically as necessary to protect us from our own folly.

I read this phrase and thought of my friend Eli Herring, a math teacher and a part-time coach at a nearby high school. He had a chance for millions. His place in the NFL draft was a certainty. Experts predicted that he would be the first offensive lineman taken in the draft and that he would get a signing bonus worth millions. “But Herring, a devout Mormon, turned down a possible multimillion-dollar deal with the Oakland Raiders” because he would not play on the Sabbath. “He announced to the NFL that if he were drafted, he wouldn’t serve” (Reader’s Digest, April 1996, p. 185). His love for the Lord kept him back from a certain kind of honor.

A second example: In the movie *A Man for All Seasons* (my all-time favorite movie), Richard Rich asked Sir Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England, for a position at the court of England. More, sensing an inherent weakness in Rich’s character, told him no. More said, “A man should go where he won’t be tempted.” Later he offered Rich a position teaching. “Be a teacher Rich. You could be a good teacher. Perhaps a great one.”

“And if I was, who would know?” asked the young man.

More’s response is one of my favorite lines from all of literature. “Yourself. Your students. God. Not a bad public, really.”

It was More’s intent to keep Rich “back from honor,” because he knew that it would (as it eventually did) destroy him. This was also the intent of the Lord. But Balaam would not be kept back. (Here comes the donkey again, at a gallop) His heart was “set so much upon the things of this world,” and he “aspired to the honors of men.” (D&C 121:35) and he would not be denied. For the rest of this story we must look in other chapters and other verses of scripture in the Bible, but take all together, these passages give a pretty clear picture of what happened. And they deliver a sobering warning.

THE ISRAELITES DESTROY THE MIDIANITES AND SLAY BALAAM.

2 Peter 2:15 says that Balaam “loved the wages of unrighteousness.” I mentioned that Jude says he “ran greedily after . . . reward.” Revelation 2:14 says it best.

But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who *taught Balac* [sic] *to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.*”

Balaam taught Balak. He must have said something like this: “I am prevented by my Lord and my covenants from cursing Israel. But I can tell you how to get their God to curse them. Involve them in the immoral practices associated with idol worship in your country.” Thus we read in Numbers 25:1 that “the people began to commit whoredoms with the daughters of Moab,” and that they learned to do so “through the counsel of Balaam.” (Num. 31:16)

CONCLUSION: We cannot be too careful about this. The desire for honor from the world, the lure of leadership, even in the mission field, is a minefield. I remember Elder a missionary from my mission fretting and grumbling about his lack of opportunities for leadership in the mission. “It is all politics!” he claimed. The desire for riches, the attraction of physical gratification, the need for public recognition—they can all be subtle and pernicious evils. We must remember that the only true evidence of our worth comes from the Lord, and it comes only in one way: by the presence and the gifts of the Spirit in our lives. Everything else is, as John Taylor said, “fried froth.”

So, don’t be a donkey.

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