

**The Bible in One Year Week 12: Numbers (Pt. 2)**  
(Genesis 12:1-3; Numbers 22:2-13; Hebrews 6:13-19a)

• **Before Shrek, there was Numbers...**

- Today, I want to talk to you about the story of a talking donkey—and no, we're not talking about *Shrek*. We're talking about *the Bible*. Specifically, Numbers 22-24, the story of Balaam and his donkey. Whether it's your first time reading this story or you've heard it before, *it's pretty weird*.
  - For those who've been tracking with the daily readings: *how are you doing?* I told you at the beginning of this journey we're going to encounter some pretty wild, astonishing stuff. And Numbers really has been a *trip*, right? Frustrating. Inspiring. Even downright *disturbing*.
  - But, we carry on, because we believe, like the guys at the Bible Project say, "*The Bible is one unified story that points to Jesus,*" and for that reason alone it's worth reading (and wrestling with) the whole thing! Think about it: these are the Scriptures Jesus read and loved and *fulfilled*. Although at times we're perplexed, we press on, confidently looking for God to give us a fresh Word. Now, before the talking donkey, let's get our bearings and take a "30,000 foot view."
- A friend of mine who's a pastor in the Pittsburgh area shared how he was reading a children's Bible with his son: it was the story of Jesus feeding 5,000 and it mentioned how these people couldn't just go get a burger and fries at the drive-thru. His son interrupted, "Dad wait, why couldn't they go get a burger and fries?" "Well, pal, they weren't invented yet. You couldn't just go to McDonald's anytime you wanted." "*What?! Are you serious?! Wow, I am so glad I didn't live back then. I would not want to live in a world without burgers and fries.*" "Me neither, bud!"
- That's kind of what it's like for us 21<sup>st</sup>-century people to read the Bible. We live in a McDonald's world. We live in a super-sonic, 5G, smartphone, modern-medicine, mars-rover, nuclear-power, post-enlightenment, post-modern world. And we're reading these God-breathed Scriptures about a people who lived 3,000 years ago in the late-Bronze Age Ancient Near East. It's a timeless Word with the timeless truth of a glorious Gospel that comes to us out of *a specific context in time*. And that context is *way, way* different than yours and mine.
  - Most of us come to these stories of Scripture as people who are able to shield ourselves from some of the harsher realities of this fallen world: but for the people in these stories, those harsh realities were just *life*. For them, it wasn't the scenes of judgement that shocked them. It was the people's rebelliousness and how many times God forgave them! Modern readers are shocked by judgement. Ancient readers were shocked by grace. And when you really, honestly think about it: divine grace is actually a lot more surprising than divine judgement.
- I guess I'm just trying to say: don't be discouraged if this has been hard. Stick with it and trust. When we study and pray and wrestle together, we find the treasures God's Word still offers.
- Alright, *Numbers*. Today, we read Genesis 12 to refresh our memory of this Covenant God made with the flawed, chosen family of Abraham. Genesis sets the stage for the whole, big Story by showing how this good, beautiful, holy God created a good world and blessed it. But the people, his image-bearers, were deceived. Humans fell into rebellion, wickedness, and arrogance.
  - By the time we get to Numbers, it's clear that even though God has graciously chosen Israel to be *his own special people*, they are just as flawed and rebellious as everyone else. Numbers highlights the tension between God's faithfulness and Israel's unfaithfulness, between God's justice and mercy. Balaam and his donkey in Numbers 22 put these tensions on full display.

• **A King, a Sorcerer, a Donkey, and an Angel**

- Here's the SparkNotes version. After spending a year at Mount Sinai to get all their instructions for how to live with God, Israel ventured out to head towards the land God promised. But things went wrong. They complained, doubted, and rejected God's plan: so, a journey that was supposed to take about 2 weeks became *40 years of wandering in the wilderness*.
  - In this story, they're at the journey's last stage in Moab, where the next generation is getting ready to finally move into the land and move on with God's plan. At this point, the story suddenly shifts to a totally different perspective, and this change in perspective highlights just how *faithful* God is to these people and how *unfaithful* they have been.

- We meet these new non-Israelite characters, Balaak, king of the Moabites, and Balaam, a prominent pagan sorcerer. King Balaak has heard all the Israelites have been up to, how none can overcome them, how *vast* they are in numbers, and he's terrified of what they could do. So, he summons the greatest sorcerer around to try and thwart them.
- All this time, Israel has been wandering, whining and bickering, doing their best to mess up God's plan. They've been their own worst enemy. But now, there's a big threat from the outside. Israel's safety hangs in the balance, yet God is there protecting them, and they're *clueless* any of it's happening.
- Now, you'd think this Balaam character would be portrayed as the epitome of pagan evil and corruption in this story, but here's what's so ironic: it turns out, Balaam and his donkey seem to have a whole lot more faith in God's word than the Israelites do. Here's how it goes down:
  - This non-Israelite King summons the non-Israelite, witchdoctor-type guy to come and put a *curse* on Israel while they're camping out in the wilderness of Moab. Balaam says: "Ok, let me sleep on it and seek the LORD about this one, and I'll let you know what he says."
  - Hold on. A pagan sorcerer, from among the wicked people Israel is going to drive out, gets offered a rich reward by a king to "do his thing" and curse some people he doesn't know or care about—and his answer is, "Hang on, let me ask their God what he wants me to do..." It's like, *if God's own people would have that straight-forward kind of obedience...?*
  - Well, the Lord actually comes and talks to Balaam—again, *surprising*. Like, God is on a talking basis with this Gentile fortune teller? And God says, "You must not put a curse on these people, because they are blessed." Just like that, Balaam tells the king's messengers: "Go on home, the Lord has forbid me from going with you. Not this time, guys."
  - The king is persistent and sends even more messengers with even greater rewards and again, Balaam says, "Listen, even if you offered me all the gold you had, I couldn't do anything to undo what God has done. I cannot curse a people God has blessed. It's futile. But, I'll sleep on it and ask the Lord about it again." I mean, Balaam seems to understand the ways of the Lord better than the vast majority of the Israelites so far.
  - But the king convinces him to come and see what they can do anyway, and here's where it gets really interesting. Balaam hops on his donkey to meet the king at a high place where they can survey the crowds of Israelites and try to call down a curse. On the road there, a mighty sword-wielding angel of the Lord blocks his path. And here's the funny part: *Balaam's donkey* sees this warrior and refuses to go further, but Balaam, the mighty diviner, cannot see him. Balaam gets ticked off at the donkey and tries to spur him on. After the third time, it says the Lord "opened the donkey's mouth," and he says to Balaam, "*Why are you getting so angry? What have I ever done to you?*" Balaam is in such a tizzy that he just has a conversation with his donkey like it's totally normal. And before he has time to process it, that's when the Lord opens his eyes and he's able to see that there is this mighty warrior of Light blocking the path.
  - Right away, Balaam is humbled, he's apologetic to the Lord and the angel—and his donkey, who let's be honest, is the real hero of Numbers at this point, no one else really gets it—and Balaam says, "Ok, I'll turn back, I'll do whatever you ask." The Lord says, "Go ahead and meet the king, but you need to do exactly as I tell you."
  - So, as the story culminates, they arrive to this lookout, standing over all the hordes of Israel, and the king says, "Ok Balaam, do your thing! Curse these people!" Balaam looks at them, looks up to God, begins to speak, and out of his mouth comes not a curse, but a *blessing*. It's hilarious. It's like that Jim Carey movie, *Yes Man*, where no matter what he does he can only say *yes* to people, even when he wants to say *no*: the king keeps trying to get Balaam to curse Israel and *seven times he can only speak words of blessing*. God even uses the mouth of this pagan sorcerer to prophesy a vision of the Messiah: "*I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.*" *Wow!*
  - Well, the king gets so angry that he says, "Just stop talking Balaam! If you're not going to curse them, then at least shut your mouth and stop blessing them!" They go home, and that's the last time we hear about Balaam, but I'm sure he never looked at his donkey the same way again.

- **What's the Point?**

- So, it's a great passage, Hebrew storytelling at its finest. But what's the point? Is it just here for comedic relief? There's got to be more to it. Here's at least three points to take away:
  - First, the Lord, the God of Israel, is the God of *all the earth*. Do we forget that sometimes? It doesn't mean that all paths lead to the same place or that every view of God out there is equally valid; it does mean that God can choose to do whatever God wants to do and use whomever God wants to use. Just because God chose a special people to make a covenant with and give special, unparalleled revelation to and bring salvation through, doesn't mean God is not at work elsewhere. God's not afraid to color outside the lines or take an unconventional route when he wants to. The Bible is actually full of little hints and reminders about this: there's Melchizedek in Genesis, there's Rahab in Joshua, there's Ruth (a Moabite), there's the people of Nineveh in Jonah—all non-Israelites. The New Testament continues the pattern, highlighting people outside the Covenant who demonstrate a greater faith than many who are inside the Covenant: the Roman officer who came to Jesus to heal his servant, the parable where Jesus chooses to make a *Samaritan* of all people the hero of mercy, the Syrophenician woman who persisted until Jesus healed her daughter, the Roman Centurion at the Cross who was the first human character in Mark to recognize Jesus as "the Son of God." In all of these stories, Grace is working faith into the lives of people *outside* the official "in-crowd" of God's people. I'm not saying we should draw precise conclusions from a sort-of ambiguous story; I'm just saying that Scripture points to the fact that God is bigger than we imagine and we need to be careful not to box him in, because the Bible doesn't.
- In Thailand, I got to spend each afternoon at a Buddhist monastery for a couple months. There was a young monk there who looked like a monk, dressed like a monk, and practiced the rituals like the others: but he was also a follower of Jesus. He went in as a Buddhist monk, but while there he experienced a vision of Christ and become a believer in Jesus. And he continued doing his Buddhist monk thing, but believing in Christ and talking to others about Christ. I mean, what do you do with that? God has a normal way of doing things, but he doesn't always do things the normal way. The boundary lines that we sometimes draw are not obstacles for God: he can do anything with anyone. He's the God of all the earth.
- Second, *things are not always as they seem*. It should be obvious, but let this story remind you that we see and comprehend only the smallest fraction of all that God is actually doing. What we call "reality" is only our apprehension of a small fraction of what is actually *real*. Balaam didn't perceive the bright burning Angel of the Lord. The donkey did. Lucky for Balaam! It wasn't until *the Lord opened his eyes* that he saw what was real, what was going on right in front of him. Israel had no idea either: they were clueless about what God was doing to protect them up in the hills while they were complaining down in the valley. Let that sink in. We lament when *things go wrong*—understandably. But what about all the things that *go right*? What about *all the things that could go wrong*, but don't? Things are not always as they seem.
- Third, *God is absolutely committed*. Do we realize *just how serious* he is about this Covenant? Or do we expect any less? Like, is God the kind to say one thing and do another, or go halfway? 400 years before Balaam tried to curse his descendants, childless Abraham heard God say: "I will bless you and make you a great nation, whoever blesses you I will bless and whoever curses you I will curse..." We might see all the intense judgement, yet forget the bigger truth: *God's holy love burns like a consuming fire for his people and his purposes*. He will not be deterred. He is absolutely resolved. He is going to shed his own blood for this plan to heal and restore the world.
  - Jesus said that we are in a *new Covenant* with God. If God was that committed to the Abraham Covenant that prepared the way for Jesus, *what does that mean for this New Covenant that is sealed by the very blood of his Son? What does that mean for me and for you?* Do you realize just how committed God is to *your redemption, your restoration, and your ultimate good*? We fail. His faithfulness *doesn't*. What he said, he will do. Believe it. We might have started with the story of a talking donkey, but we ended up *here*. His word is *powerful*. Give your life completely to him today, because he's completely committed to you. Amen.