

The Book of Numbers

Lesson 13

Chapters 22:22b - 41

As we ended the last lesson, God was angry with Balaam because he had saddled his donkey and gone with the Moabite/Midianite envoy without waiting to be asked again as instructed by the LORD. Balaam had sinned a grave sin! Why? Here is the reason. The LORD had given Balaam specific, audible instructions. Balaam heard the Word of the LORD and he was without excuse when he failed to follow those instructions. The last verse of last week's lesson said, **"But God was angry because he was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as an adversary against him"** (22:22a).

The angel of the LORD stood in the path of Balaam. What do we know about the "angel of the LORD?" The word for "angel" is *malak* and it means *messenger, ambassador, envoy, or angel*. The word for "LORD" is *Jehovah*. Although the term *the angel of the LORD* is perfectly fine in the NASB version, the direct translation would have been better rendered the *messenger of Jehovah*. The term was used six times in Genesis and once in Exodus.¹³ In the four Genesis 16 verses, this *angel of the LORD* is seen taking care of Hagar after Abraham sent her away with her son Ishmael to fend for themselves. In the two Genesis 22 verses, it is this same *angel of the LORD* calling twice to Abraham to stop him from killing Isaac on Mount Moriah. Neither of these two chapters tells us any more about Who the angel is except that He is a messenger of the LORD and that most assuredly he could have been a created angel as we commonly think of angels. However, in the Exodus 3 verse and surrounding passage we have enough information to identify the Person of the *angel of the LORD*.

Exodus 3: 1 Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. **2** And the **angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush**; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. **3** So Moses said, "I must turn aside now, and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up." **4** When the **LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush**, and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." **5** Then He said, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." **6** **He said also, "I am the God of your father**, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

With this passage we know for sure that the *angel of the LORD* was the LORD God, or more specifically and correctly, *Jehovah God*. This is not God the Father or God the Holy Spirit; this is the second Person of the Trinity, the LORD God Who will be later known as the God the Son. He is properly called the *angel* because angels are spirits just as God is also a spirit and the Holy

¹³ Genesis 16:7, 9, 10, 11; Genesis 22:11, 15; Exodus 3:2)

Spirit is a spirit. So, too, Jesus was a spirit before He took on the flesh of a man to become our Savior. The *angel of the LORD* is the pre-incarnate *LORD Jesus* Who spoke all the world into being on the six days of His creative work. This same *angel of the LORD* was the LORD of Adam and Eve, Noah and his children, Abraham, Sarah and Keturah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Leah, Rachel, Zilpah and Bilhah, the twelve sons of Jacob as well as their descendants who became the nation of Israel. Moses knew this same *angel of the LORD* well. He had visited Him many times on Mount Sinai until the Tabernacle was completed and then spoke with Him regularly over the next 38 years in the Holy of Holies. Now, lo and behold, the same *angel of the LORD* was angry with Balaam, one of His prophets who was born and raised in Canaan Land and knew very little about the nation of Israel. But together, this *angel of the LORD* had a personal relationship with Balaam prior to this event in the story line. Balaam was evidently accustomed to speaking with the *angel of the LORD*. He was so accustomed to speaking with Him that Balaam glossed over the LORD's last instruction and sinned. Now, this same *angel of the LORD*, the LORD God pre-incarnate took His place visibly in the path of His prophet who had disobeyed His command.

Donkey, Balaam, Two Servants

Num 22:22b Now he was riding on his donkey and his two servants were with him.

And so, the scene was set, Balaam sits on his donkey, riding down the trail to meet with Balak in his capital city in the providence of Moab. But he was not alone. He had his two servants with him, either walking or riding, Not mentioned here, the envoy of highly esteemed Moabites and Midianite Elders must have been with him also because he left his home at Pethor with them that morning. We must wonder at this point, and, we have no way of knowing, just how far down the road did the *angel of the LORD* position Himself? Was he just a mile or so down that path? If so, Balaam could have had the excuse that he was waiting for the envoy to say something about his joining them to return to Balak. Many years after this event, King Saul will use a similar tactic as an excuse for not obeying the Word of the LORD; his kingdom would be ripped from him because of that mistake. But, perhaps the LORD had allowed Balaam to travel far enough that he had no excuse for being with the envoy. The LORD does that! Even though He knows what you are doing before you do, He will let you journey far enough down your sinful road that you have no excuse for your actions. He let David do that with Bathsheba, He let Solomon do that with his kingdom, He let Jezebel and Ahad do that with Naboth's vineyard just to mention three in the Old Testament. The same can be said in the New Testament with the priests, the pharisees, Judas Iscariot, Ananias and Sapphira and many more. Tragically, all Balaam had to do was turn around and go home and the anger of the LORD would have been extinguished. Tragically, that is the same basic answer to all those examples mentioned above, Just turn around and return to what you should have never left. But, just like most of us, Balaam is on his mission and not even looking ahead at the danger in front of him.

Donkey Reacts to Angel of the LORD - First Time

Num 22:23 When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand, the donkey turned off from the way and went into the field; but Balaam struck the donkey to turn her back into the way.

Balaam was not alone. Did the others not see the *angel of the LORD*? Was He visible only to the donkey? The others might not have been granted the opportunity to see the LORD. When Daniel had a vision in his book in chapter 10, those with him could not see the LORD.

Daniel 10: 7 Now I, Daniel, alone saw the vision, while the men who were with me did not see the vision; nevertheless, a great dread fell on them, and they ran away to hide themselves.

Neither, when Saul was cast down and blinded on the Damascus Road, did his aides see the LORD although they heard Him.

Acts 9: 7 And the men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one.

Nevertheless, the donkey did see and did what he could to protect his master. But in doing the best that he could, dumb donkey as he was, his best was not good enough for his master and his reward for saving his life was a beating. We often say it like this, “No good deed goes unpunished.” Balaam attempted to turn her back on the road, but that did not happen because the LORD was there with His sword drawn. She entered a vineyard instead.

Donkey Reacts to Angel of the LORD – Second Time

Num 22:24 Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path of the vineyards, *with* a wall on this side and a wall on that side. **22:25** When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pressed herself to the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall, so he struck her again.

It was a common practice to wall off the vineyard with stone walls. The walls separated one owner's field from another's. The walls also acted as a barrier to hold the water from the rains in the field for optimal use in the production of plump and juicy grapes. The LORD moved to a narrow path at the entrance to the vineyard and the donkey saw Him there and intentionally scraped Balaam's foot against the wall to get his attention. It did not work. Once again, the female donkey, trying to do the right thing to notify his master of the danger ahead, was beaten.



Classic picture of the Angel of the LORD with sword drawn ready to slay Balaam

Donkey Reacts to Angel of the LORD- Third Time

Num 22:26 The angel of the LORD went further, and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn to the right hand or the left. **22:27** When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam; so Balaam was angry and struck the donkey with his stick.

Vineyards are not like other crops in the field. The vines of the grape plants are normally attached to trellises of some fashion, even in that era. The main trunk of the plant was allowed to grow each year and after several years, a stout trunk was established and each year the new growth was allowed to trail off on ropes tied to the trellises. This allowed the fruit of the vine to be up off the ground and much easier to harvest. The grape plants were planted in rows; therefore, because the donkey turned into the vineyard and the plants were like walls on either side of Balaam, we can assume that it must have been in the growing season when the hedges were full. The one thing that is important here is that the donkey had moved into one of the very narrow rows and when she saw the LORD in the row ahead of her, she could not turn around so she did what she could do, she fell to the ground. She did not hurt Balaam, but Balaam pulled out his staff and brutally beat the female donkey. Then the most amazing thing happened.

Donkey Speaks to Balaam

Num 22:28 And the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?"

The donkey spoke to Balaam. We must wonder if the rest of the envoy heard the words of the donkey. But, another amazing thing happened.

Balaam Speaks to Donkey

Num 22:29 Then Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a mockery of me! If there had been a sword in my hand, I would have killed you by now."

Balaam spoke to the donkey. Was it common for Balaam and the donkey to have a conversation? Was this the first interaction? Were there others? Or, was Balaam just so angry that he reacted to the supernatural speaking of the donkey without even noticing the supernatural impossibility of the whole thing? Why, Balaam even threatened the donkey with a crime of passion, "If there had been a sword in my hand, I would have killed you by now." Good thing he did not have a sword in his hand! What would the good Judge of the universe have thought about that if Balaam had killed the innocent donkey? The reason for Balaam's anger was that the donkey had made Balaam a "mockery" in the eyes of his two servants and all the envoy of Moab and Midian. The word "mockery" means *acting severely* as in *bringing pain* on someone as in *making sport or making fun* of a person. Balaam was humiliated that his donkey was not obeying him. He had not yet noticed that the LORD was humiliated that Balaam had not obeyed Him.

Donkey Speaks to Balaam

Num 22:30 The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I ever been accustomed to do so to you?" And he said, "No."

Unbelievably, the donkey continued the conversation with Balaam. He defended himself to the master he had served all his and Balaam's life. This must have been an old donkey which had never disobeyed his master because Balaam agreed with him! Surely Balaam should have come to his senses and known something was wrong, but he did not.

LORD Speaks to Balaam

Num 22:31 Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed all the way to the ground. **22:32** The angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out as an adversary, because your way was contrary to me. **22:33** "But the donkey saw me and turned aside from me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, I would surely have killed you just now, and let her live."

Balaam had not seen the LORD with His sword drawn, but when Balaam did see the LORD, he stepped off the donkey and knelt to the ground. The LORD had a question for Balaam and Balaam had a flimsy answer.

Here we must pause to evaluate the lesson in this event. Perhaps this is a lesson for ministers more than laymen, but laymen in leadership positions often make the same mistakes. Furthermore, because our homes are to be established under the same principles as the Church, this lesson does apply to everyone who, like Balaam, has a personal relationship with the LORD. Here is the lesson. Balaam, as the earthly authority in this story, struck out on his own in disobedience to the LORD. Then, an earthly creature which had absolutely no authority over anything made three attempts to help the master. Even the dumb donkey knew that the master had sinned. The one helping was the one punished. The one in the right was the one chastened. The only one trying, as best she knew how, was the one brought to the point of the penalty of death. Beaten three times! How can that unjust punishment be rectified? The way of the donkey was straight, the way of Balaam was "contrary" to the LORD. Listen to the words of the LORD again, "If she had not turned aside from me, I would surely have killed you just now, and let her live." The LORD found the donkey "not guilty!" The LORD found Balaam "guilty!" And unlike in many of the LORD's other instructions to the nation of Israel where the property of the guilty received the same punishment as the guilty owner, it was not so in this case, the donkey would have been granted immunity and lived past the days of Balaam. But the donkey was the tool that the LORD used to gather the attention of Balaam once again and bring him into line. The donkey was the one who obeyed even when her master did not. Had it not been for the donkey, this would have been the end of Balaam, there in the vineyard, away from his home, in clear disobedience to the *angel of the LORD*.

Balaam Repents

Num 22:34 Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the way against me. Now then, if it is displeasing to you, I will turn back."

He gave a flimsy excuse, "I did not know that you were standing in the way against me." The only reason he did not know was that he did not care, and he did not have his eyes focused on that which was ahead of him on his journey or what he had faithlessly started that morning at his home. He said, "I will turn back." Boom! There it is! There is the confession. He knew exactly what he had done wrong! No one said anything to him about turning around and going home. Where did he get that idea? What would have caused him to conjure up that offer? Only one thing is possible, he remembered the original Word of the LORD that he had disobeyed that morning. Instead of waiting to be asked, he "saddled his donkey and went with the leaders of Moab."

The LORD's Instructions

Num 22:35 But the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but you shall speak only the word which I tell you." So Balaam went along with the leaders of Balak.

In the LORD's reply to Balaam's request, He repeated something that He had said to Balaam the night before: "but you shall speak only the word which I tell you." Now we know the whole reason for Balaam's debacle with the donkey! The LORD wanted to get Balaam's attention in such a way that Balaam would not dare say one word that the LORD did not tell him to say. The LORD knew Balaam would make the mistake the first time and it was on purpose. He knew Balaam would disobey his command. Had he wanted to kill Balaam, all he had to do was keep the mouth of the donkey shut! The LORD could do that. It was by the power of the LORD that the donkey spoke, and Balaam answered. Donkeys do not speak human words, try as they may. But the LORD chose to get Balaam's attention by the miraculous miracle of the donkey speaking in human words. What do you think the Moabites thought of that? If they were worried before about the Israelites, they should surely be worried about this prophet and his Arabic speaking beast of burden. Balaam had learned his lesson and he would not be caught off guard again.



Balak's Excitement

Num 22:36 When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, which is on the Arnon border, at the extreme end of the border.

From the northwest corner of Moab's land at the junction of the Jordan and Jabbok Rivers to the Arnon River where Balak's city was located, the envoy continued in the city called "Moab."
(Location unknown.)

Conversation of Balak and Balaam

Num 22:37 Then Balak said to Balaam, "Did I not urgently send to you to call you? Why did you not come to me? Am I really unable to honor you?" 22:38 So Balaam said to Balak, "Behold, I have come now to you! Am I able to speak anything at all? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I shall speak."

Balaam was ready and willing to speak to Balak but the blame for anything said belonged to the LORD Who would craft the words in Balaam's mouth.

Balaam, Balak and Kiriath-huzoth

Num 22:39 And Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-huzoth. 22:40 Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and sent *some* to Balaam and the leaders who were with him. 22:41 Then it came about in the morning that Balak took Balaam and brought him up to the high places of Baal, and he saw from there a portion of the people.

Kiriath-huzoth may have been a city; however, the name means *streets of the city*. Because we do not know the location of a city or village by this name, it would be logical to take the verse to mean that Balak took Balaam out into the streets of the city called "Moab" and there presented him to the people. It was probably evening by the time they arrived and Balak sent them a meal of oxen and sheep. Notice that the envoy of dignitaries was still with Balaam through the night. Balak did not stay with Balaam that night. But in the morning, Balaam was ushered to the sacrificial worship site of the false god Baal. Although we have seen the name "Baal" attached to one person (Baal-hanan, Genesis 36:38-39) and one place (Baal-zephon, Exodus 14:2, 9) in the first books of the Bible, this is the first mention of Baal as a god that is worshiped by people and has a specific place of worship designated for him. It will not be the last because 104 more times in the Scripture he will be named as a false god. When we reach Numbers 25, some of the Israelites will forsake the LORD Who has cared for them for 40 years and turn to a worship of this Baal, influenced by those they are living with in their new plots in the Promised Land.

From the worship site of Baal, Balaam can see the camp of some of the Israelite nation. Balak puts him there purposefully to allow him to see those that he is to curse. Balaam gave Balak an instruction and the king obeyed. Balak will not be happy with Balaam by the end of the day.