

Out of the Donkey's Mouth

Numbers 22-24

A few years ago Barbara Thiering wrote in the Sydney Morning Herald that no person can represent God because God is beyond the personal. She said that God is remote and so cannot become flesh like us.

This puts a rather challenging slant on Christmas (which is upon us soon) and it raises some interesting questions:

Can God communicate with his creation? Can God speak to the people he has made?

Can God reveal himself to human beings?

Or as Barbara Thiering would have it, is God so above everything, is he so magnificent, so majestic, so removed from us, that it is impossible for him to talk to us? Is God reduced to merely watching us from a distance, imprisoned by his own majesty and purity?

Thiering wants us to believe in a silent God. But is the God of the Bible really silent or can he speak?

Numbers 22-24 sheds some light on this topic for us this morning.

Last week we finished in chapter 14 and I want to start at chapter 22 today—so I'll quickly fill in the eight missing chapters for us.

By the time of chapter 20, thirty-eight years have elapsed since the Israelites failed to enter to Promised Land because of their failure to trust in the promises of God. For thirty-eight years Israel have been wandering between Sinai and Kadesh-Barnea just to south of the Promised Land (slide).

A trip that normally takes 11 days has taken 38 years. And during that time in the wilderness another generation was born, the leaders Miriam and Aaron have died, and Moses has been told by God that he will not enter the Promised Land.

By chapter 21 the time of God's judgement is almost over and Israel again is starting to record great victories over her enemies. The defeat of Arad, Sihon and Og. Despite 38 years of punishment, God remains committed to his promises to Israel.

Chapter 22 opens with Israel camped on the plains of Moab on the edge of the Promised Land. We read in 22:1–3, “Then the Israelites travelled to the plains of Moab and camped along the Jordan across from Jericho. Now Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites, and Moab was terrified because there were so many people. Indeed, Moab was filled with dread because of the Israelites”.

On the brink of entering the land, Israel’s reputation for winning wars has preceded them. When Balak, the king of the Moabites, learns that Israel is on his doorstep he's not altogether too thrilled. Indeed, chapters 22-24 tell us about the attempt of the pagan king Balak to secure victory over the Israelites by sorcery.

He will not beat them by brute force, so Balak turns to the supernatural for help. We might call chapter 22 then, “**A prophet for Moab—the free word of God**” (slide).

Balak doesn't summon his army, instead he sends for Balaam the prophet. Balaam is a diviner, a pagan diviner at that, and Balak wants him to pronounce a curse on Israel which will spell their doom.

Balaam was a sought of Ancient Near Eastern version of Alan Jones or James Packer. If you can secure Balaam's services, you can be sure of the downfall of those whom he curses, and the success of those he commends.

So Balak sends word to Balaam in 22:5-6, “A people has come out of Egypt; they cover the face of the land and have settled next to me. Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the country. For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed”.

Balaam consults the Lord and he is told in verse 12 that Israel is blessed by God and so he may not pronounce a curse on them. So Balaam refuses Balak's invitation. But kings don't like to be refused and so Balak sends another, more distinguished envoy in verse 15.

Balaam again refuses but agrees to consult the Lord to see what else the Lord might say. When Balaam consults the Lord for a second time, the Lord says in verse 20 this time go, "but do only what I tell you". So next day, Balaam saddles his donkey and sets out with Balak's men.

Now Balaam the prophet's journey is not an ordinary one. Along the way the angel of the Lord blocks the donkey's path with drawn sword (slide). Balaam is blinded to this, so when the donkey swerves away, he beats it. Three times the donkey sees the Lord, three times the donkey swerves away, and three times the donkey is beaten.

Let's pick up the story from verse 27 in chapter 22:

"When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Balaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?" Balaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now." The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?" "No," he said. Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell face down".

Was Balaam riding Shrek's donkey? Either way, the opening of the donkey's mouth is a startling thing. You are supposed to be surprised. You are supposed to find this episode humorous.

The point is that the great Balaam who is being summoned by the king to put a curse on Israel is in fact totally ill-equipped to do such a thing. Balaam cannot even see what his own donkey can see. And when there's an argument between the great Balaam and his donkey, remarkably it's the donkey who wins.

This humiliating exchange is meant to show us that the great Balaam has far less insight than even a donkey who is inspired by God. Finally Balaam sees and learns that he is dependent upon God for his insight.

Amusing as it may be, verses 32 and 33 point out that the incident with the donkey is a life-saving one. For Balaam's motives are not right and his path is a reckless one. Balaam needs to learn that the word of God is not available at his beck and call, and that he must only speak what God puts into his mouth (verse 38).

Let's digress for a short moment and talk about the word of God.

First lesson (slide). The word of the Lord cannot be summoned by anyone. I went to an almost Christian camp once and I was told to go away on my own and come back when the Lord had spoken to me a unique and special word.

But the word of God is not bound, it cannot be summoned at my beck and call. The word of God cannot be demanded, or purchased or manipulated for financial gain. And the Lord is not dependent upon humans to speak for him. He can even speak through the mouth of a donkey if he wishes. God speaks when he wants to speak, and he refrains when he wants to refrain.

God is free, he is in debt to no man and nor is he bound to anyone.

Second lesson (slide). No matter how the Lord speaks, he must be listened to and obeyed. It is not possible to predict when God might speak, he is unpredictable, but when God speaks his words are precious and are not to be taken for granted. The Bible regards the speaking of God to human beings as a rare and precious event, recorded and passed down to others.

We must listen to God's words in his Bible, and to his word alone. We have no call on God, his word is free. God chooses to speak when he wants to. And when he does speak his words are precious and are to be obeyed.

Third lesson (slide). Don't look for the word of God in the wrong places. Some Christians are misguided as to where they can hear the voice of God. It is dangerous and pointless consulting seers and palm readers, astrologists and numerologists in order to hear the voice of God. Our feelings and moods are not the word of God and are not to be elevated above the word of God. I've heard young single Christians say, "it doesn't matter that my fiancé isn't a Christian, I've prayed about it and I have a warm inner peace that we should get married".

Now it's true that God can speak anyway he wants too, even through a donkey, for God is free to speak as he chooses. But, and listen hard, there is only one place where God promises to speak—and that is through the Scriptures. God promises to speak to us in his Bible.

2 Tim. 3:16 is essential in this regard, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work". Everything we need for Christian living is revealed in the word of God. Scripture equips us for every good work so why go looking elsewhere.

So if you want to hear the voice of God and you're not reading your Bible then you're looking in the wrong place. You must not ignore the place where God has promised to speak to you. But if unpredictably God speaks to you by a donkey, then listen. But don't stare into your alphabet soup waiting for the letters to form a word from God. Read the Bible and obey it.

It's to our peril that we ignore the place where God speaks loudly and clearly.

Let's get back to our text and Israel wandering around in the wilderness for 38 years. What were they punished for? For hearing the word of God and failing to obey it. For receiving the promises of God and failing to trust them. The Israelites had to learn that it doesn't matter through whom the word of God comes, what matters is that it comes from God.

It might come through a pagan seer like Balaam, it might come through a donkey, but if it comes from the Lord then it must be trusted and obeyed. Chapter 22 then, "A prophet for Moab—the free word of God".

Let's go onto chapter 23 and our next big point (slide). **“A promise for Israel—the faithful word of God”**.

Balaam eventually arrives and Balak is keen to remind him that he will be richly rewarded for his services. The trouble is, Balaam is now primed only to speak God's words and the curses that Balak wants so badly will fall by the wayside. Unbeknown to Balak, his “hit man” is pointing the gun at him.

In chapter 23 and 24, Balaam gives three prophecies at Balak's request.

The *first oracle* is in 23:7-10. Look especially at verse 8 where Balaam says “How can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the LORD has not denounced”? The curse that Balak wants from Balaam, Balaam is not prepared to give.

In fact, Balaam commends Israel for they are unlike the other nations, and he commends them because they are great in number and as the Lord has promised to Abraham. And quite remarkably, in verse 10, Balaam even wants to die the death of an Israelite.

King Balak understandably is quite upset. His well-paid hit man has sided with the enemy. In verse 11 Balak retorts, “What have you done to me (Balaam)? I brought you to curse my enemies, but you have done nothing but bless them!”

If you don't succeed, try again, and so Balak optimistically gives Balaam another chance to curse Israel. The *second oracle* is in 23:18-25. This time Balaam praises God for the special relationship he has with Israel and Balak is foiled again. Then in the *third oracle*, 24:3-9, Balaam reflects upon the great Kings Israel shall have. Israel is anything but cursed.

Balaam has a “three strikes and you're out” policy.

In verse 10 of chapter 24 we see that, “Balak's anger burned against Balaam. He struck his hands together and said to him, ‘I summoned you to curse my enemies, but you have blessed them three

times. Now leave at once and go home! I said I would reward you handsomely, but the Lord has kept you from being rewarded””.

Israel are at the end of their journey and in a most unpredictable way they are reminded of the goodness of God, his holiness and their calling to be like him. They are reminded that God's promises will not fail. Even though they've spent 38 years in the wilderness, God is still with them and his promises are still alive.

Before Balaam leaves, he utters one more oracle, this time against Moab. We see this in chapter 24:15–19. This last oracle also concerns a new promise in verse 17, “A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Sheth. Edom will be conquered; Seir, his enemy, will be conquered, but Israel will grow strong. A ruler will come out of Jacob and destroy the survivors of the city”.

Balaam sees a king who will crush Israel's enemies.

Our last point takes us into the New Testament (slide). **“A promise for Us—the faithful word of Jesus”**.

Our big picture of the Bible tells us that Jesus dashed to pieces the enemies of God's people. It was a strange victory. The words Jesus uttered as he hung there on the cross sounded to some ears as odd as words coming from a donkey. “Father, forgive them”. And the victory blast sounded as he died, “It is finished”, and the echo returned, “He is risen”. And death, sin, and Satan were defeated.

If you want to hear the voice of God you need to listen in the very place that God has chosen to speak—in the 66 books we call the Bible.

And here God chooses to speak to us in a most unpredictable way, through his Son who died on a Roman cross and who rose victorious from the grave. God speaks to us now through his risen Son. And as the gospel is preached throughout the world many will acknowledge Jesus as their King and receives life in his name. Through Israel all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.

Israel, on the verge of the Promised Land, needed to hear that they are dependent upon every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. There was nothing in them that commended them to God, but still God was committed to them.

And the promise is held to them of a great king who will rise and defeat their enemies. The God who speaks, the God who is faithful to his promises, gracious in his dealings with sinful humans—he is the God who has made himself known to us in the person of his Son, our crucified Saviour, our mighty resurrected King.

Hear God's word. Trust God's word. Follow him. Amen.