

NOTES
ON
THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

by

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"Things new and old."

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by

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Numbers 22 - Numbers 24

These three chapters form a distinct section of our book - a truly marvellous section, abounding in rich and varied instruction.

In it we have presented to us:

- first, the covetous prophet; and,
- secondly, His sublime prophecies.

There is something peculiarly awful in the case of Balaam. He evidently loved money - no uncommon love, alas! in our own day. Balak's gold and silver proved a very tempting bait to the wretched man - a bait too tempting to be resisted. Satan knew his man, and the price at which he could be purchased.

If Balaam's heart had been right with GOD, he would have made very short work with Balak's message; indeed it would not have cost him a moment's consideration to send a reply. But Balaam's heart was all wrong, and we see him, in chapter 22 in the melancholy condition of one acted upon by conflicting feelings. His heart was bent upon going, because it was bent upon the silver and gold; but, at the same time, there was a sort of reference to GOD - an appearance of religiousness put on as a cloak to cover his covetous practices.

He longed for the money; but he would fain lay hold of it after a religious fashion. Miserable

man! most miserable! His name stands on the page of inspiration as the expression of one very dark and awful stage of man's downward history. **"Woe unto them," says Jude, "for they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward and perished in the gainsaying of Core."**

Peter, too, presents Balaam as a prominent figure in one of the very darkest pictures of fallen humanity - a model on which some of the vilest characters are formed. He speaks of those **"having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin; beguiling unstable souls; an heart they have exercised with covetous practices; cursed children: which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; but was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man's voice forbad the madness of the prophet"** (II Peter 2:14-16).

These passages are solemnly conclusive as to the true character and spirit of Balaam. His heart was set upon money - **"he loved the wages of unrighteousness,"** and his history has been written by the pen of the Holy Ghost, as an awful warning to all professors to beware of covetousness which is idolatry.

We shall not dwell further upon the sad story. The reader may pause for a few moments, and gaze upon the picture presented in Numbers 22. He may study the two prominent figures, the crafty king, and the covetous self-willed prophet; and we doubt not he will rise up from the study with a deepened sense of the evil of covetousness, the great moral danger of setting the heart's affections upon this world's riches, and the deep blessedness of having the fear of GOD before our eyes.

We shall now proceed to examine those marvellous prophecies delivered by Balaam in the audience of Balak, king of the Moabites.

It is profoundly interesting to witness the scene enacted on the high places of Baal, to mark the grand question at stake, to listen to the speakers, to be admitted behind the scenes on such a momentous occasion. How little did Israel know or imagine what was going on between the Lord and the enemy. It may be they were murmuring in their tents at the very moment in the which GOD was setting forth their perfection by the tongue of the covetous prophet. Balak would fain have Israel cursed; but, Blessed Be GOD, He will not suffer any one to curse His people. He may have to deal with them Himself, in secret, about many things; but He will not suffer another to move his tongue against them. He may have to expose them to themselves; but He will not allow a stranger to expose them.

This is a point of deepest interest. The great question is not so much what the enemy may think of GOD's people, or what they may think about themselves, or what they may think of one another. The real - the all-important question is, What does GOD think about them? He knows exactly all that concerns them; all that they are; all that they have done; all that is in them. Everything stands clearly revealed to His all penetrating eye. The deepest secrets of the heart, of the nature, and of the life, are all known to him. Neither angels, men, nor devils know us as GOD knows us. GOD knows us perfectly; and it is with Him we have to do, and we can say, in the triumphant language of the apostle, **"If God be for us, who can be against us?"** (Romans 8).

GOD sees us, thinks of us, speaks about us, acts towards us, according to what He Himself has made us, and wrought for us - according to the perfection of His own work. "Beholders many faults may find;" but, as regards our standing, our GOD sees us only in the comeliness of CHRIST; we are perfect in Him. When GOD looks at His people, He beholds in them His own workmanship; and it is to the glory of His holy name, and to the praise of His salvation, that not a blemish should be seen on those who are His - those whom He, in sovereign grace, has made His own. His character, His name, His glory, and the perfection of His work are all involved in the standing of those with whom He has linked Himself.

Hence, therefore, the moment any enemy or accuser enters the scene, the Lord places Himself in front to receive and answer the accusation; and His answer is always founded, not upon what His people are in themselves, but upon what He has made them through the perfection of His own work. His glory is linked with them, and, in vindicating them, He maintains His own glory. He places himself between them and every accusing tongue. His glory demands that they should be presented in all the comeliness which He has put upon them. If the enemy comes to curse and accuse, the Lord answers him by pouring forth the rich current of His everlasting complacency in those whom He has chosen for Himself, and whom He has made fit to be in His presence for ever.

All this is strikingly illustrated in the third chapter of the prophet Zechariah. There, too, the enemy presents himself to resist the representative of the people of GOD. How does GOD answer him? Simply by cleansing, clothing, and crowning the one whom Satan would fain curse and accuse, so that Satan has not a word to say. He is silenced for ever. The filthy garments are gone, and he that was a brand is become a mitred priest - he who was only fit for the flames of hell is now fitted to walk up and down in the courts of the Lord.

So also when we turn to the Book of Canticles we see the same thing. There the Bridegroom, in contemplating the bride, declares to her, "**Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee**" (Song of Solomon 4:7). She, in speaking of herself, can only exclaim "**I am black**" (Song of Solomon 1:5, 6). So also in John 13 the Lord JESUS looks at His disciples, and pronounces them "**Clean every whit**;" although, in a few hours afterwards, one of them was to curse and swear that he did not know Him. So vast is the difference between what we are in ourselves and what we are in CHRIST - between our positive standing and our possible state.

Should this glorious truth as to the perfection of our standing make us careless as to our practical state? Far away be the monstrous thought! Nay, the knowledge of our absolutely settled and perfect position in CHRIST is the very thing which the Holy Ghost makes use of in order to raise the standard of practice.

Hearken to those powerful words from the pen of the inspired apostle, "**If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. when Christ, our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory. Mortify therefore your members,**" &c (Colossians 1 - 5).

We must never measure the standing by the state, but always judge the state by the standing. To lower the standing because of the state, is to give the death-blow to all progress in practical

Christianity.

The foregoing line of truth is most forcibly illustrated in Balaam's four parables. To speak after the manner of men, we never should have had such a glorious view of Israel, as seen in "**the vision of the Almighty**" - "**from the top of the rocks**" - by one "**having his eyes open**," had not Balak sought to curse them.

The Lord, blessed be His name, can, very speedily, open a man's eyes to the true state of the case, in reference to the standing of His people, and His judgment respecting them. He claims the privilege of setting forth His thoughts about them. Balak and Balaam with "**all the princes of Moab**" may assemble to hear Israel cursed and defied; they may "**build seven altars**," and "**offer a bullock and a lamb on every altar**;" Balak's silver and gold may glitter under the covetous gaze of the false prophet; but act all the powers of earth and hell, men and devils combined, in their dark and terrible array, can evoke a single breath of curse or accusation against the Israel of GOD.

As well might the enemy have sought to point out a flaw in that fair creation which GOD had pronounced "**very good**," as to fasten an accusation upon the redeemed of the Lord. Oh! no; they shine in all the comeliness which He has put upon them, and all that is needed, in order to see them thus, is to mount to "**the top of the rocks**" - to have "**the eyes open**" to look at them from His point of view, so that we may see them in "**the vision of the Almighty**."

Having thus taken a general survey of the contents of these remarkable chapters, we shall briefly glance at each of the four parables in particular. We shall find a distinct point in each - a distinct feature in the character and condition of the people, as seen in "**the vision of the Almighty**."

In the first of Balaam's wonderful parables, we have the marked separation of GOD's people from all the nations, most distinctly set forth.

"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." *

* Poor, wretched Balaam! miserable man! He would fain die the death of the righteous. Many there are who would say the same; but they forget that the way "**to die the death of the righteous**" is to possess and exhibit the life of the righteous. Many - alas! how many - would like to die the death who do not live the life. Many would like to possess Balak's silver and gold, and yet be enrolled amongst the Israel of GOD. Vain thought! Fatal delusion! We cannot serve GOD and Mammon.

Here we have Israel singled out, and partitioned off to be a separated and peculiar people - a people who, according to the divine thought concerning them, were never, at any time, on any ground, or for any object whatsoever, to be mingled with or reckoned amongst the nations. "**The people shall dwell alone**."

This is distinct and emphatic. It is true of the literal seed of Abraham, and true of all believers now. Immense practical results flow out of this great principle. GOD's people are to be separated unto Him, not on the ground of being better than others, but simply on the ground of what GOD is, and of what He would ever have His people to be. We shall not pursue this point further just now; but the reader would do well to examine it thoroughly in the light of the divine word. "**The people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations**" (Numbers 23:8, 9).

But if the Lord, in His sovereign grace, is pleased to link Himself with a people; if He calls them out to be a separate people, in the world - to "**dwell alone**," and shine for Him in the midst of those who are still "**sitting in darkness and the shadow of death**," He can only have them in such a condition as suits Himself. He must make them such as He would have them to be - such as shall be to the praise of His great and glorious name.

Hence, in the second parable, the prophet is made to tell out, not merely the negative, but the positive condition of the people.

"And he took up his parable and said, rise up, Balak, and hear; hearken unto me, thou son of Zippor: God is not a man, 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. He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel: the Lord his God is with him, and the shout of a king is among them. God brought them out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn. 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 [not what hath Israel wrought?] Behold, the people shall rise up as a great lion, and lift up himself as a young lion: he shall not lie down until he eat of the prey, and drink the blood of the slain" (Numbers 23:18-24).

Here we find ourselves on truly elevated ground, and on ground as solid as it is elevated. This is, in truth "**the top of the rocks**" - the pure air and wide range of "**the hills**," where the people of GOD are seen only in "**the vision of the Almighty**" - seen as He sees them, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing - all their deformities hidden from view - all His comeliness seen upon them.

In this very sublime parable, Israel's blessedness and security are made to depend, not on themselves, but upon the truth and faithfulness of the Lord. "**God is not a man that he should lie; neither the son of man that he should repent.**" This places Israel upon safe ground. GOD must be true to Himself. Is there any power that can possibly prevent Him from fulfilling His Word and oath? Surely not. "**He hath blessed; and I cannot reverse it.**" GOD will not, and Satan can not reverse the blessing.

Thus all is settled. "**It is ordered in all things and sure.**" In the previous parable, it was, "**God hath not cursed.**" Here it is, "**He hath blessed.**" There is very manifest advance.

As Balak conducts the money-loving prophet from place to place, the Lord takes occasion to bring out fresh features of beauty in His people, and fresh points of security in their position.

Thus it is not merely that they are a separated people dwelling alone; but they are a justified people, having the Lord their GOD with them, and the shout of a king among them. **"He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel."**

The enemy may say, "There is iniquity and perverseness there all the while." Yes, but who can make the Lord behold it, when He Himself has been pleased to blot it all out as a thick cloud for His name's sake? If He has cast it behind His back, who can bring it before His face. **"It is God that justifieth; who is he that condemneth?"** GOD sees His people so thoroughly delivered from all that could be against them, that He can take up His abode in their midst, and cause His voice to be heard amongst them.

Well, therefore may we exclaim **"What hath God wrought"** It is not "What hath Israel wrought!"

Balak and Balaam would have found plenty to do in the way of cursing, had Israel's work been in question. The Lord be praised, it is on what He hath wrought that His people stand, and their foundation is as stable as the throne of GOD. **"If God be for us, who can be against us"** If GOD stands right between us and every foe, what have we to fear? If He undertakes, on our behalf, to answer every accuser, then, assuredly, perfect peace is our portion.

However, the king of Moab still fondly hoped and sedulously sought to gain his end. And, doubtless, Balaam did the same, for they were leagued together against the Israel of GOD, thus reminding us forcibly of the beast and the false prophet, who are yet to arise and play an awfully solemn part in connection with Israel's future, as presented on the apocalyptic page.

"And when Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, he went not, as at other times, to seek for enchantments [what a dreadful disclosure is here] but he set his face toward the wilderness. And Balaam lifted up his eyes, and he saw Israel abiding in His tents, according to their tribes; and the Spirit of God came upon him. And he took up his parable, and said, Balaam the son of Beor hath said, and the man whose eyes are open hath said, he hath said, which heard the words of God, which saw the vision, of the Almighty, falling into a trance, but having his eyes open: How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel! As the valleys are they spread forth, as gardens by the river's side, as the trees of lign aloes which the Lord hath planted, and as cedar trees beside the waters. He shall pour the water out of his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters, and his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted. God brought him forth out of Egypt; he hath, as it were, the strength of an unicorn: he shall eat up the nations his enemies [terrible announcement for Balak!] and shall break their bones, and pierce them through with his arrows. He couched, he lay down as a lion, and as a great lion: who shall stir him up? Blessed is he that blesseth thee, and cursed is he that curseth thee" (Numbers 24:1-9).

"Higher and higher yet" is surely the motto here. We may well shout "Excelsior," as we mount up to the top of the rocks, and hearken to those brilliant utterances which the false prophet was forced to give out. It was better and better for Israel - worse and worse for Balak. He had to stand by and not only hear Israel **"blessed,"** but hear himself **"cursed"** for seeking to curse them.

But let us particularly notice the rich grace that shines in this third parable.

"How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel!"

If one had gone down to examine those tents and tabernacles, In "**the vision**" of man they might have appeared "**black as the tents of Kedar.**" But, looked at in "**the vision of the Almighty,**" they were "**goodly,**" and whoever did not see them thus needed to have "**his eyes opened.**"

If I am looking at the people of GOD "**from the top of the rocks,**" I shall see them as GOD sees them, and that is as clothed with all the comeliness of CHRIST - complete in Him - accepted in the Beloved. This is what will enable me to get on with them, to work with them, to have fellowship with them, to rise above their points and angles, blots and blemishes, failures and infirmities.*

* The statement in the text does not, by any means, touch the question of discipline in the house of GOD. We are bound to judge moral evil and doctrinal error. I Corinthians 5:12, 13.

If I do not contemplate them from this lofty - this divine ground, I shall be sure to fix my eye on some little flaw or other, which will completely mar my communion, and alienate my affections.

In Israel's case, we shall see, in the very next chapter, what terrible evil they fell into. Did this alter the Lord's judgment? Surely not. "**He is not the son of men that he should repent.**" He judged and chastened them for their evil, because He is holy, and can never sanction, in His people, anything that is contrary to His nature. But He could never reverse His judgment respecting them. He knew all about them. He knew what they were and what they would do; but yet He said, "**I have not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither have I seen perverseness in Israel. How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel!**" Was this making light of their evil? The thought were blasphemy. He could chasten them for their sins; but the moment an enemy comes forth to curse or accuse, He stands in front of His people and says, "**I see no iniquity**" - "**How goodly are their tents.**"

Reader, dost thou think that such views of divine grace will minister to a spirit of Antinomianism? Far be the thought! we may rest assured we are never further away from the region of that terrible evil than when we are breathing the pure and holy atmosphere of "**the top of the rocks**" - that high ground from whence GOD's people are viewed, not as they are in themselves, but as they are in CHRIST - not according to the thoughts of man, but according to the thoughts of GOD. And, furthermore, we may say that the only true and effectual mode of raising the standard of moral conduct is to abide in the faith of this most precious and tranquillizing truth, that GOD sees us perfect in CHRIST.

But we must take one more glance at our third parable. Not only are Israel's tents seen to be goodly in the eyes of the Lord, but the people themselves are presented to us as abiding fast by those ancient sources of grace and living ministry which are found in GOD. "**As the valleys are they spread forth, as gardens by the river's side, as the trees of lign aloes which the Lord hath planted, and as cedar trees beside the waters.**" How exquisite! How perfectly beautiful! And only to think that we are indebted to the godless confederacy between Balak and Balaam for

those sublime utterances!

But there is more than this. Not only is Israel seen drinking at those everlasting well-springs of grace and salvation, but, as must ever be the case, as a channel of blessing to others. **"He shall pour the water out of his buckets."**

It is the fixed purpose of GOD that Israel's twelve tribes shall yet be a medium of rich blessing to all the ends of the earth. This we learn from such Scriptures as Ezekiel 47 and Zechariah 14, on which we do not now attempt to dwell; we merely refer to them as showing the marvellous fullness and beauty of these glorious parables. The reader may meditate, with much spiritual profit, upon these and kindred Scriptures; but let him carefully guard against the fatal system falsely called spiritualizing, which, in fact, consists mainly in applying to the professing church all the special blessings of the house of Israel, while, to the latter, are left only the curses of a broken law. We may rest assured that GOD will not sanction any such system as this. Israel is beloved for the fathers' sakes; and **"the gifts and calling of God are without repentance"** (Romans 11).

We shall close this section by a brief reference to Balaam's last parable.

Balak, having heard such a glowing testimony to Israel's future, and the overthrow of all their enemies, was not only sorely disappointed, but greatly enraged:

"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, and Balaam said unto Balak, 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 [the very thing his poor heart craved intensely], 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. And now, behold, I go unto my people: come therefore, and I will advertise thee what this people shall do to thy people in the latter days. [This was coming to close quarters.] And he took up his parable, and said, Balaam the son of Beor hath said, and the man whose eyes are open hath said: he hath said, which heard the words of God, and knew the knowledge of the most High, which saw the vision of the Almighty, falling into a trance, but having his eyes open: I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: [tremendous fact for Balaam!] there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth" (Verse 10-17).

This gives great completeness to the subject of these parables. The top-stone is here laid on the magnificent superstructure.

It is, in good truth, grace and glory.

- in the first parable we see the absolute separation of the people;
- in the second, their perfect justification;
- in the third, their moral beauty and fruitfulness; and, now,

- in the fourth, we stand on the very summit of the hills - on the loftiest crag of the rocks, and survey the wide plains of glory in all their length and breadth, stretching away into a boundless future.

We see the Lion of the tribe of Judah crouching; we hear his roar; we see Him seizing upon all his enemies, and crushing them to atoms. The Star of Jacob rises to set no more. The true David ascends the throne of His father, Israel is pre-eminent in the earth, and all his enemies are covered with shame and everlasting contempt.

It is impossible to conceive anything more magnificent than these parables; and they are all the more remarkable as coming at the very close of Israel's desert wanderings, during which they had given such ample proof of what they were - of what materials they were made - and what their capabilities and tendencies were. But GOD was above all, and nothing changeth His affection. Whom He loves, and as He loves, He loves to the end; and hence the league between the typical "**beast and false prophet**" proved abortive. Israel was blessed of GOD and not to be cursed of any. "**And Balaam rose up, and went, and returned to his place: and Balak also went his way.**"

~ end of chapter 24 ~

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