

Yarrow, November 28, 2010

Ps 83:1,2
 Ps 9:5,6
 Ps 2:1,2,3,4
 Ps 77:5
 Ps 10:7; Hy 15:3,4
 Num 22:36-24:25
 Num 22:38b

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We sang from Ps 2 some moments ago. “Why do the restless heathen madly rage,” we sang, “What haughty schemes are they in vain contriving?” There’s a healthy optimism in what we sang; we’re sure that Christ is king and so the attempts of nations to ignore Christ and disobey His will is futile.

But is it, congregation? Are the ungodly not winning in our world? Where is the successful opposition in Canada to the evils of abortion and drugs and divorce and homosexuality – and so many other blatant sins against God? Where is the triumph in our world over rising Islam? Do secular media and secular education not have an unbreakable hold on what tomorrow’s parents will be teaching the coming generation?? Brazil is a growing economic power, but a land beset by so much corruption – and is corruption what we want to see succeed in our world? And what shall we say of the posturing in Korea these days?? We see it everywhere: evil grows, and people don’t want to stop it or are not able to stop it. How then can we sing so heartily that the heathen are contriving their schemes in vain? Is the Son of God really sovereign?

The Lord God, brothers and sisters, once took the pagan sorcerer Balaam and compelled him –like a dumb donkey– to utter words of glorious promise for the people of God. Those words have come to pass – for God is faithful. More, those words are still coming to pass – for God remains faithful. The naked eye may see things that look so different than God has announced, but we know: there is more to reality than the naked eye sees. There’s more too to the sovereignty of our Lord Jesus Christ than the eye sees. In a world of unbelief and apostasy, this is the good news I may proclaim to you today.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THROUGH THE PAGAN SORCERER BALAAM, GOD ENCOURAGES ISRAEL TO BELIEVE HIS SOVEREIGNTY.

1. The prophecy of Balaam
2. The encouragement for Israel

1. The prophecy of Balaam

Balak king of Moab had been terrified at the horde of Israelites appearing on his borders. How to rise above this people, how to save Moab’s skin in the face of this people – this was for him a major political problem. Taking military action made no sense; he was aware that Israel had roundly defeated the two kings of the Amorites – so what chance did Moab have.... So Balak had chosen to engage Israel on a deeper level; he thought to get in contact with the deities behind Israel, and move them to curse this horde. Hence his appeal to Balaam the sorcerer.

Balaam, you recall, was happy to oblige. But the Lord God stopped Balaam on the road, and taught him through the talking donkey that his own mouth must speak not the things Balaam would like to say about Israel, but must speak the things that God commands him to say about Israel. Said God in Num 22:35: “only the word that I speak to you, that you shall speak.”

With that message resounding in his ears, Balaam arrived in the land of King Balak. King Balak, we are to realize, is not aware of the restrictions that God has placed on Balaam; Balak doesn’t know about the talking donkey. But the Lord has Balaam tell the king straightaway in our text what character Balaam’s prophesies are going to have. Balak wants a curse upon Israel; through Balaam as his tool Balak wants to reach into the world of gods and spirits in an effort to manipulate them. But see, beloved: from the word Go, God takes control, and God makes plain to Balak that whatever word comes from Balaam’s mouth will be a

word determined not by Balak but by God Most High. That's our text: "the word that God puts in my mouth, that I must speak."

Well, King Balak doesn't take this so literally. Balak thinks this is just diviner's talk; for a diviner to influence, to manipulate a god, that diviner must show himself to be a good servant of that god. And that's what Balak hears in the words of Balaam; Balak understands that Balaam diplomatically positions himself as a dutiful servant of Israel's God so that this God might be the willing to do what Balaam –and Balak– wants. So, on the next day, Balak takes Balaam to a choice place to get the job over and done with; Balak counts on Balaam cursing the horde in the valley below. When the diviner asks for seven altars with seven sacrifices, Balak is happy to oblige; as far as he is concerned, everything is going fine.

But see, now, brothers and sisters, what happens. Four times Balaam utters a prophecy. That is: four times *the Lord God* put a word in Balaam's mouth for Balaam to speak. Balak wants a curse, but God uses the opportunity to tell Balak –and Israel, and us!– of what God has in store for His people. Here is gospel; the Lord impresses on Balak that He blesses the people of His choice (and no one can stop that blessing), and He curses those who oppose His own. Four times Balaam speaks, and each time the words he speaks are clearer, yes, each time Balak has more and more reason to despair. Look with me through the words the Lord causes Balaam to speak.

First prophecy

The heart of the first oracle in chap 23 is vs 8. Says Balaam, "How shall I curse whom God has not cursed?" Here's a warning to Balak; don't count on a curse! In fact –vs 9– this is "a people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations." That is, Israel is special, this people is different. You can divide all the peoples of the world into two groups, with all the nations in one group and Israel in the other. Israel is different, because the Lord God has claimed this people as His, has established with Israel His covenant of grace. Of this people God has said that "you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:6) – very special. Balak may try to curse, but he's up against the only living God and His covenant with one specific nation, and that makes Balak's wish totally futile.

Just how special this nation is to God is clear from the words of vs 10. To Abram God had said, "I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth" (Gen 13:16) and "multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore" (Gen 22:17). And see: in the valley below is this innumerable horde; in the space of not 500 years this people has multiplied from one barren couple to a nation of 600,000 men, plus women and children – a multitude of well over two million persons. Talk about blessed, special to God!

Second prophecy

How disappointing for Balak. He's afraid of this people, and wants a curse. So he's determined to try again; Israel must be cursed. But listen: the Lord God moves Balaam to speak again, and again he utters words of blessing, and clearer than the first prophecy. King Balak wants a curse, but, says the diviner Balaam, "God is not a man, that He should lie;" you can't get God to change His mind about Israel; this people is different, special to God, and that's the way it's going to stay. In fact –vs 23– "there is no sorcery against Jacob, Nor any divination against Israel;" all my labours to do what you want, Balak, all my efforts to get Israel cursed, shall invariably fail. Why? Vs 20: God "has blessed, and I cannot reverse it." The nature of that blessing is described in vs 21: God "has not observed iniquity in Jacob, Nor has He seen wickedness in Israel." That is: when God Most High looks at Israel, He sees something different than He sees with other nations. With Philistines and Egyptians and Moabites and Canaanites He sees evil, He sees blemishes, their sins. *But not with Israel.* Why not? Because Israel is better? No, not so. But this is the people of His love, the people of His covenant, His bride. So *God is not willing* to see evil with Israel. Here, brothers and sisters, is simply the gospel of the sacrifices offered in the tabernacle located in the valley below, in the midst of the camp of Israel. Those sacrifices spell out that the sinner ought to die for his sins, but God is pleased to transfer those sins to the animal so that the animal dies instead of the sinner. So the sinner goes free, and that's to say that God does not observe iniquity in Jacob anymore nor wickedness in Israel. Truly, this is a special people, the people of God's favour.

And if that's not enough, Balaam continues in vs 21 to tell Balak that "the LORD his God is with" Israel, and the result in turn is that "the shout of a King is among them." In other words, within Israel there's

a ruler, one who is going to influence things, a mighty one. Vs 24: Israel “rises like a lioness, And lifts itself up like a lion” (Gen 49:9). Moab had better watch out; a roused lion is no friendly opponent!

Notice, congregation, how there is development from the first prophecy to the second. The first hadn’t spoken of a king, but the second does. The first hadn’t used the imagery of a roused lion, but the second does. Here is development; God lets Balaam see into the future, and gradually see more and more of what the future will hold for Israel, and therefore what the future will be for the world around Israel. It’s a future with Israel dominating the nations.

Third prophecy

And yes, that’s a major problem for Balak! Hence Balak’s attempt a third time still to get that curse over Israel. But listen, beloved: in the third prophecy the Lord opens the vistas further still. We’re told that this time Balaam didn’t even try to influence God by divination; instead, the Holy Spirit Himself came upon Balaam so that he prophesied of Israel’s future. Listen to God’s revelation in 24:5:

“How lovely are your tents, O Jacob!
Your dwellings, O Israel!
Like valleys that stretch out,
Like gardens by the riverside,
Like aloes planted by the LORD,
Like cedars beside the waters....”

Do you recognize the picture, beloved? The picture is one of peace, of prosperity. Balak wants a curse, but this is anything but a curse; here is the atmosphere of Paradise!

And notice: in the midst of that prosperity and peace the Lord moves Balaam again to speak about a king; vs 7, “his kingdom shall be exalted.” Indeed, vs 8: “He shall consume the nations, his enemies; He shall break their bones....” Israel is like a lion, crouched down, ready to spring upon his enemy.... Balak wants the horde in the valley below destroyed, and see: the prophecy he hears tells him that *he himself* will be destroyed!

Again, beloved, notice how the prophecy develops. The Lord let Balaam see something about a king in the second prophecy, but it’s still somewhat hazy. In the third prophecy, though, the picture of what this king will do comes through clearer; he’ll consume the nations, that is, he’ll be victorious. Slowly the picture of God’s plan for the future becomes clearer..., and that plan terrifies the king of Moab. Vs 10: “Balak’s anger was aroused against Balaam” and he told him to get lost, “flee to your place!”

But Balaam has another word to say, before he goes home. Vs 14: “Come, I will advise you what this people will do to your people in the latter days.”

Fourth prophecy

Balaam prophesies a fourth time, and now the Lord lifts the curtain further still in relation to what the future holds. What Balaam sees? All he’s seen in the past comes into sharpest focus yet in the words of vs 17: “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; A Star shall come out of Jacob; A Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, And destroy all the sons of tumult.” Here’s the climax of what God reveals, more than Balaam has seen so far. “I see him,” Balaam says, I see him there on the horizon. Who does Balaam see? He calls him a “star” and a “sceptre”. We need to know: the term ‘star’ refers to the same king as Balaam had mentioned in his second and third prophecies. The term ‘sceptre’ too refers to a king; a sceptre is the royal rod that the king held in his hand (cf Esther). And: the king Balaam sees on the horizon of the future is no small king; no, this king in Israel shall “batter the brow of Moab,” says Balaam. The picture is one of Moab being crushed, being smashed. Such is the power of the king that will arise from Israel.

Nor is Moab the only one to be crushed under the hammer of this king. In the vss 18-24 Balaam sees what’s going to happen to several of the nations around Israel, and they all have a dark future. Edom, Seir, Amalek, and the Kenites, even the Kittim: all those nations around Israel are broken under the authority of the king of Israel, or must move over to supply room for Israel. How marvellous, brothers and sisters! Here is what God spoke to Abram so long ago: “I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing...; In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:2f). God’s people Israel on *top* of the international ladder!

Do you see, beloved, what's happened here? Balak was determined to have Israel cursed, and so expected Balaam to speak according to Balak's wishes; hence the big sum of money Balak had sent along to buy the diviner. But Israel's God cannot be manipulated; not Balak's will must be done in heaven as Balak desires it on earth, but God's will must be done on earth as He desires it in heaven. That is why Balaam could speak only the words that God put in his mouth. The four prophecies of Balaam go to *prove* that will of *God* must be done, and not a man's will. As our text has it: "the word that God puts in my mouth, that I must speak."

2. The encouragement for Israel

Where, now, congregation, were Balaam and Balak when Balaam spoke the words God put in his mouth, uttered these oracles to Balak? According to the passage we read, the two men were up on the hills, overlooking the multitudes in the valley below. In other words, the people of Israel were totally unaware of the effort of Balak to curse Israel, unaware too of the prophecies that God moved Balaam to speak about Israel. But: it pleased the Lord, in a way we don't know how, to have these words from Balaam come to the attention of the people of Israel. That is: not only Balak had to hear of the visions God gave Balaam about Israel's future, but the people of Israel also had to hear of that future. That brings us to our second point: what encouragement is there here for Israel?

For indeed, beloved: here is enormous encouragement for Israel! For years they'd been slaves in Egypt, on the bottom of the ladder. Then they'd spent 40 years wandering through the desert, with not an acre to call their own – let alone be internationally recognized. As soon as they achieve a victory over the kings of the Ammonites – chap 21 – Balak seeks to *curse* them. And in the Promised Land are Anakim and other expert fighters – what shall Israel's future bring?! Here, beloved, is the encouragement of Balaam's words: the *God* of the covenant shall give Israel a place *op top* of the ladder. Says God through Balaam: Look into the future, My people; I tell you that you shall triumph, in fact, one day a king will arise from your midst who will crush Moab, will crush so many of your enemies, you will be the head of the nations, a blessing to all! See there, beloved, what the Lord God was saying to Israel through the words of Balaam! Here was God's care for His own, His desire to encourage His people in the face of the battles ahead! Talk about the love of a covenant God for His beloved people!¹

We know what happened afterwards. By the gracious leading of sovereign God, the Lord led His people into the Promised Land and gave them the inheritance He'd promised. The nations of Canaan didn't have a chance before the special people of God Most High. After the death of Joshua, Israel went through a period of Judges – a time characterized by people doing what was right in their own eyes, for there was no king in Israel. In fact, in the days of the Judges the people of Israel even served Eglon king of Moab for 18 years (Judg 3:12ff); Israel was very much the bottom of the ladder.

But the day came when "the shout of a king" was heard among the people, for the Lord God gave them the man Saul. Through King Saul the Lord began to fulfill the word of Balaam about Israel. Of Saul it is written that he "established his sovereignty over Israel, and fought against all his enemies on every side, against Moab, against the people of Ammon, against Edom.... Wherever he turned, he harassed them. And he gathered an army and attacked the Amalekites, and delivered Israel from the hands of those who plundered them" (I Sam 14:47ff). You see, beloved, the promises of God as spoken through Balaam come to pass, simply because God keeps His word. But Saul's work was done in so very much brokenness; Saul was scarcely the king that would place Israel at the top of the ladder.

So it pleased God to give His people-by-covenant more. After Saul the Lord raised up David as king. Of David it is said that "he defeated Moab." We even get to read details: "forcing them down to the ground, he measured them off with a line. With two lines he measured off those to be put to death, and with one full line those to be kept alive. So the Moabites became David's servants, and brought tribute" (II Sam 8:2). Here is fulfillment of the Lord's word through Balaam about Moab; a king in Israel would "batter the brow of Moab" (24:17). In fact, David reigned over a considerable kingdom, and under him the people of Israel became the head of the nations; all the sons of tumult around Israel were subdued through David's army.

¹ See here Seerveld, *Balaam's Apocalyptic Prophecies*, 53ff.

But David too was a sinful man; think only of his affair with Bathsheba, his murder of Uriah, his weakness as a father for his sons. Sin burdened the man, and so he could not be the fullness of the blessing God intended for the nations; his kingdom had to collapse..., and so it eventually happened.

Yet that does not mean that Balaam's vision had it all wrong! Balaam saw in the distant future a Star coming from Jacob, a Sceptre from Israel. Ultimately Balaam sees none less than Jesus Christ, the great Son of David, to whom God gave all authority in heaven and earth. O true, the human eye didn't see that at first. The human eye saw but a little child in a manger, one who had to flee from the rages of Herod as he sought to kill the infants of Bethlehem. The human eye saw only a carpenter's son, rejected by His own people, mocked, crucified, killed. But if God has blessed, who can curse?? The crucified Christ had to rise from the dead, ascend into heaven, and receive from the Father the throne at His right hand. King of kings He is today, and Lord of the lords of the earth. This sovereign Christ has defeated the evil one and bound him, so that the forces of darkness behind Balak are broken. Soon He comes again on the clouds of heaven, and on that day every knee in heaven above and the earth beneath and hell below shall bow before Him. That includes the leadership of North Korea and the corrupt officials of Brazil and Canada, and it includes those who pull the strings in the media and in education, it includes the bully at work and your friendly but unbelieving neighbour. No effort to curse God's people can succeed, because God has ordained that the Star of Jacob is a blessing to the nations.

What do you think, beloved: could Balaam see into the future so clearly as to see the triumph of Christ over sin and Satan? Did the Lord grant Israel grace to see clearly beyond the horizons of time? Let's not kid ourselves; Israel had to accept *by faith* what the Lord was telling them through Balaam. Their circumstance *at the time* was that they were nomads, that they were not the head of the nations at all. But God through Balaam's prophecies asked Israel *to believe* that He, their God-by-covenant, would certainly give His own an exalted future.

Did Israel in Saul's day, or David's for that matter, see that God's promises through Balaam were in fact being fulfilled? Again, let's not kid ourselves; Israel had to accept by faith what the Lord had told them. *And so it is today!* Does the eye see that Jesus Christ is King of kings today? The newspapers tell us of terrorists, tell us of corruption. We know our society to drown in its lawlessness – abortion, divorce, homosexuality, euthanasia, you name it. Does that demonstrate that Christ is king?? Is the Star of Jacob so obviously the ruler of the world that the kings had better bow down and kiss the Son with trembling? No, the naked eye doesn't see that. *But that doesn't matter, beloved; that doesn't change the facts any!* Balaam had to speak God's word, *did* speak God's word, and that's why I *believe* that the Lord Jesus Christ *is* the King today. In heaven above He utters His command, and His will is done on earth by the world's big men and the world's little men. The prevalence of sin in our land and around the world does not change that fact a dot. The Star of Jacob is king in Canada today and king in Korea and in Brazil and in Iran too, and He's making His kingdom come *through* the evils and frustrations of our day.

That, says the Lord, is the way things are – for the enormous comfort of God's church. The eye doesn't see it, and that's OK. The question is: do you *believe* what God caused Balaam to speak?