

Yarrow, December 5, 2010

Ps 101:1,2,3
Ps 119:42,43
Ps 106:14,15
Ps 26:6,7
Ps 75:3,4,5,6
Num 25
Num 31:1-20
Rev 2:12-17
Num 31:16

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

In the last number of weeks we've listened to the history of Balaam as recorded in Numbers 22-24. The Holy Spirit makes mention of this Balaam again in chap 31, and so we do well to complete our listening to the account concerning Balaam by listening to this chapter too.

We do so in an age of tolerance. We're not meant to find fault with others, are meant instead to give everybody space to do and believe their own thing. More, we're encouraged to try alternative lifestyles, try other faiths, share the faiths and worship styles of others.... Refusal to share, unwillingness to be open-minded about others' experiences, is bigoted and narrow-minded.... It turns out that in His final mention of Balaam, the Lord God instructs us about tolerance. It turns out that the Lord God is exceedingly *intolerant*, and Balaam would use this divine intolerance to destroy Israel after all.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD ENFORCES A POLICY OF INTOLERANCE TO THE WORLD BY MAKING BALAAM'S ADVICE COME TO NOTHING.

1. What was "Balaam's advice"?
2. How did God deliver from this advice?

1. What was 'Balaam's advice'

The words of our text are part of Moses' reaction to the deeds of the people after they had defeated the Midianites. Israel, we read, had sent out an army of 1000 men from each tribe, for a total of 12,000 soldiers, and routed the Midianites. Vs 7: "they killed all the males." But notice: they killed *only* the males. Vs 9: "the children of Israel took the women of Midian captive, with their little ones, and took as spoil all their cattle, all their flocks, and all their goods." That's what they brought to Moses, and that's what provoked Moses' outburst in vs 15: "Have you allowed all the women to live? They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the LORD in what happened at Peor."

Through "Balaam's advice", says Moses. What, congregation, are we to understand by that phrase? And why does Moses mention "Balaam's advice" as explanation of his anger? To answer our question, we need to follow the mind and actions of Balaam. First, though, I mention the fact that Balaam gave the "advice"

Moses is referring to in our text some six chapters earlier, between Num 24 and 25. That's when the "incident of Peor" took place. In fact, the war mentioned in chap 31 was sparked by the events of chap 25 (cf 31:2).

Balaam. You recall from chap 22 that he was a sorcerer of international reputation, living some 600 kms distant from where Israel was encamped. Despite the distance, he received a delegation from the king of Moab to come and curse Israel. For King Balak had been terrified at the arrival and the strength of Israel, saw his people destroyed by Israel, and so thought to engage Israel in battle – yet not on the physical level but on the spiritual. So King Balak, through a large sum of money, wanted to buy the assistance of Balaam the sorcerer; this successful sorcerer, he thought, should be able to reach into the realm of the gods and manipulate Israel's God to curse this people. As it turned out, though, Balaam the sorcerer was not able to manipulate the LORD God; rather, the LORD manipulated Balaam so this pagan sorcerer had to speak the words of blessing that God put in his mouth. That's why Balaam took up his oracle and uttered visions of God whereby the Lord made clear that Israel was blessed and would remain blessed, yes, "a Star shall come out of Jacob, A Scepter shall rise out of Israel, And batter the brow of Moab..." (24:17). We're familiar with the material.

But what happened next, brothers and sisters? I read in chap 24:11 that King Balak told Balaam to "flee to your place." According to chap 24:25, that's that Balaam did. He saddled his donkey and traveled the 600 kms back to his home in Pethor by the Euphrates (22:5).

Yet in Num 31 I read this sentence concerning Israel: "Balaam the son of Beor they also killed with the sword" (vs 8). Balaam, then, had come back, had traveled the 600 kms once more to be with the people of Moab. (Between brackets: we read in chaps 25 and 31 of the Moabites and the Midianites. They're two separate peoples, but so befriended that in these chapters they're treated as virtually one people.)

Balaam, then, had returned. Why? What drove Balaam to saddle his donkey and again make that long and uncomfortable journey back to Moab? In answer I draw your attention to what the Lord had said to Balaam in Num 22. God told him that "your way is perverse before Me" (22:32). That is: despite the fact that the Lord laid claim to Balaam's tongue so that Balaam had to speak only what God told him to speak (and therefore he spoke words of wonderful blessing for Israel), Balaam's heart was not at all in what he spoke. In his heart Balaam wanted to do what Balak asked. Why? That, beloved, is because he *wanted the money Balak offered*. I say that because of what the Holy Spirit says years later through the apostle Peter. For Peter mentions Balaam, and says of him that he "loved the wages of unrighteousness" (II Pet 2:15). What made him tick was his hunger for Balak's pot of gold. He could get that money if he could find a way still to curse Israel. It appears that back at home in Pethor he thought he found the way, and that's why he traveled the long distance back to Moab – and give his counsel to Balak.

What, now, was his advice? How did Balaam think to bring God's curse upon Israel – despite the blessings God caused him to speak earlier? In our text Moses says that Balaam gave counsel to make Israel "turn ... from the LORD in what

happened at Peor” (vs 16b). The Holy Spirit gives us more insight into this advice in the letter to the church in Pergamum. The Lord Jesus Christ in Rev 2 mentions the “teaching of Balaam,” and explains what this teaching was with these words: Balaam “taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality” (vs 14).

There we have it, congregation. Upon his return from his home at the Euphrates, Balaam went again to Balak and advised the king of Moab that he could still achieve his goal –get Israel cursed– by putting a stumbling block before the children of Israel. Get Israel to sin, tempt them, and God’s curse must fall upon the people, His anger destroy them.

Follow, brothers and sisters, the logic of it. A covenant contains two parties, in this case God and Israel. In that covenant God promised to bless Israel. To break that blessing, Balaam the sorcerer had first tried to manipulate God, to convince God to change His approach to Israel and so curse this people. To his big disappointment Balaam learned that he couldn’t manipulate God, and so couldn’t get a curse upon the people – and so he missed out on the money. So what’s he do? If he can’t manipulate *God* so that He curses His people, maybe he can manipulate *the people* so that they *attract God’s curse upon themselves!* Get the people to sin, and then God in turn must pour out His wrath on Israel, must curse! See there, brothers and sisters, the “teaching of Balaam,” see there the thinking in this sorcerer’s mind that prompts him to give to Balak the advice he gave. The advice is this: don’t be antagonistic towards Israel, because you can’t beat them that way. Instead, *befriend* Israel, tempt them, get them to sin so that God will pour His covenant wrath upon His people. Tempt them how?? Get your girls to invite their boys to your parties, get the young men of Israel to participate in the feasts of your gods, lure them to sin. That will provoke God’s wrath, and then He will have to curse His people, pour out His wrath on Israel and destroy them. And you, Balak, will be rid of your problem.¹ (And Balaam will get his pot of gold.)

How hideous, how sinister, how clever the advice! And King Balak ran with idea. The results are recorded in Scripture in Num 25:2. Says that passage: “They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods.” We need to know that in Hebrew the word ‘they’ is feminine, and the point is that the *women* of Moab came with the invitation. That’s also what our text says; it was the women who caused Israel to sin. Truly, how *cunning*.... For so many years the people of Israel had been despised, slaves in Egypt. In the desert there were alone, a self-contained unit, with no friends among the nations of the world. At the end of their desert sojourn they met up with cousin Esau in the land of Edom and sought permission to travel through his territory. But cousin Edom gave no permission; there was no friendship, only rejection (Num 20:14ff). As they approached the Promised Land, king Arad the Canaanite came out to fight Israel; there was no friendship, only rejection (Num

¹ Cf John Calvin, *Commentary*, describes the “counsel of Balaam” like this, “the Moabites should prostitute their women to the Israelites, in order to entice them by their blandishments to unholy worship. Balaam had learnt by experience that God’s favor was an invincible safeguard to protect the people from all injury. He, therefore, invents a plan whereby they may destroy themselves, by not only depriving themselves of God’s protection, but also by provoking His wrath against them” (Vol IV, pg 233).

21:1ff). The people sought permission to go through the land of Sihon king of the Amorites, but Sihon wouldn't allow it; there was no friendship, only rejection (Num 21:21ff), and so Israel had to fight.... They came in the neighborhood of Og king of Bashan, and again there was no friendship; Og and his people came out against Israel in battle (Num 21:33ff) – rejection. And now, after all that enmity, all that loneliness, all that rejection, come these Moabite girls, and they offer what the people of Israel hadn't tasted in years – *friendship, acceptance!* And if the allurements of friendship and acceptance wasn't enough, the invitation came through *girls*. Imagine it, beloved, put yourself in the shoes of Israel's boys: could you resist the advance? How cunning, how crafty! See there, brothers and sisters, an example of the scheming of the evil one! The counsel of Balaam is devilish to its core....

Did Israel heed the instruction? Did Balaam's council achieve its desired effect? How tragic the words of 25: 2: "the people [of Israel] ate and bowed down to their gods...." Covenant people, heathen people: on their knees together in front of the same idols.... And let's say now nothing of the fact that the worship of the Baals included cultic prostitution.... The people *fell* for the stumbling block Balaam counselled King Balak to lay before them.... *Here's success for Balaam!*

Now the critical question. *What is God's reaction?* Will God immediately destroy Balaam for giving such sinister, such devilish advice? No, beloved, God doesn't blame Balaam for Israel's sins! Each man has his own responsibility; with God there is no room for passing the buck to another, since God created us all to be *responsible*. So "the anger of the LORD was aroused against *Israel*," says vs 3, for *Israel* sinned. And no, beloved, there is nothing surprising about God's response, precisely because the Lord is not a man that He should change (cf 23:19). Time and again God had said it: on covenant breaking must come covenant curse. Well, God keeps His word, and so God's judgment had to come upon His people. Vs 4: "the LORD said to Moses, 'Take the leaders of the people and hang the offenders...'" And vs 8 adds that a plague broke out amongst the people of Israel, killing people here, there, anywhere, everywhere.

Do you see, congregation, what is happening? *This is exactly what Balak wanted in the first place!* Terrified he was of Israel, and therefore sought the sorcerer's help to curse the people, destroy Israel. His first attempt didn't work; Balaam couldn't manipulate God, instead ended up blessing the people, abundantly. But the second attempt worked. From Balak's perspective, "Balaam's advice", through which "Balaam ... taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel," was wonderfully effective counsel; according to His own promise in the covenant, God's wrath was consuming Israel – despite the blessings God had promised through Balaam!

Over the years the devil has not forgotten this method of troubling God's people. Some 1400 years later in the New Testament church of Pergamum, somebody in the congregation advised the members of that church that it was OK to accept the world's overtures of friendliness, and so minimize the antithesis; that's the "teaching of Balaam" Jesus refers to in Rev 2:14. Various in the congregation of Pergamum fell for this teaching, gave themselves to the world, forgot the antithesis,

forgot their covenant distinctiveness; it's the attitude of Israel in Num 25 all over again. Jesus' response? The same, beloved, as God's response in Num 25! "Repent," He says, "or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against you with the sword of My mouth" (Rev 2:16). And we know: if Jesus begins to fight against His church, that church will perish as certainly as the Israelites of Num 25 perished through the plague. In the New Testament dispensation the doctrine of Balaam is as effective in moving God to destroy His church as it was in the Old Testament – for God does not change, and so His wrath must fall upon all covenant disobedience.

That makes the question so imperative for us, brothers and sisters: is the counsel of Balaam still taught today? Make no mistake on the point, beloved! The devil is shrewd enough to know that he has here a proven way to bring the wrath of God upon the church of God. It suits him to the ground to whisper into our ear that there should be friendliness with the world. It doesn't matter to the devil whether that sense of friendliness comes through unbelieving girls befriending the boys of the church or whether it comes through the sheer attractiveness of material wealth or the fun of places of entertainment; the devil isn't fussy – as long as he can drive a wedge between God's people and their God, can somehow get God's people to act in a way that provokes God's anger upon them.

Here we have our responsibility: it is for us to be alert to the teaching of Balaam, ever to ask whether we've fallen for that advice, whether in fact we are bringing God's wrath upon ourselves. That we find relaxation and entertainment in the movies and music an unbelieving world also enjoys – does that speak of friendship with the world or does it speak of a healthy sense of the antithesis? Does it bring upon us God's smile or God's frown, God's blessing or God's curse? We can't get out of this world, that's obvious – and so may not retreat to an island within ourselves, oblivious to what happens around us. But given that Satan would love to rob us of God's blessing, and so will entice us cunningly to befriend the world – how are we in fact faring? Yes, the instruction of Numbers 25 & 31, and the warning of Revelation 2 is in the Bible for a reason! Here's room for discussion within the families and amongst our friends.

The material of our text is loud in its warning. But there's also, brothers and sisters, delightful gospel here, and it's to this that we now need to turn. Israel's sin earned God's curse, yet Israel was not completely destroyed. It's our second point:

2. How God delivered from this advice

Observe what happened in chap 25. In the face of God's anger, the people gathered around the tabernacle to weep. That tabernacle: that is where holy God dwelt in the midst of His people. That's where the people congregated in the face of the plague, seeking God's mercy. Even while they were crying before God, the plague continued through the camp – evidence of God's continuing holiness and wrath.

Look, there comes a young Israelite, a well-known young man, son of a leader in the tribe of Simeon (25:14). On his arm he's got an unknown girl, a Midianite. What he's doing with her in the camp? Vs 6: he's going to present her "to his family." And not just on the sly; no, "before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of Israel" he's going to show off his prize to his mates! And not just a little

'meet my Suzie' session; no, he's going to make his young friends jealous with what he dares to do with her. He takes her straight into a tent and gets so intimate with her that one thrust of a javelin kills them both. How taken the young man is with his passions. And to do it publicly, right in the midst of the congregation where holy God is pleased to dwell! This very ripe fruit of Balaam's counsel must, *must* cause the full load of God's holy wrath to spill upon the people of Israel and destroy them totally! Isn't He holy?!

But see, beloved, God's wrath does not wipe out the people in one fell swoop! Why not? One man, *one* man from the whole congregation of those weeping before the Lord, jumps into action. From the book of Chronicles we learn that Phinehas was the captain over the gatekeepers of the tabernacle (1 Chron 9:20). That is, he was responsible to maintain the purity and holiness of the tabernacle, God's dwelling. Hence the javelin in his hand. When he saw the young man of Israel with the girl of Midian, he went after them into the tent "and drove the spear through both of them – through the Israelite and into the woman's body" (vs 8). Then we read this amazing word, "then the plague against the Israelites was stopped" (vs 8b). That action on Phinehas' part: that stopped the plague. How come? Says God in vs 13: Phinehas "was zealous for the honour of his God and made atonement for Israelites."

It's an intriguing formulation. His zeal "made atonement" for Israel. How so? Phinehas, we need to know, was the son of the high priest Eliezer (Aaron had died already, chap 20), and would himself be the next high priest. Here is the point: *in his role as priest* Phinehas' zeal and resulting actions produce atonement for Israel. Why? Because in his zeal for God he shed blood to get rid of sin. *So he foreshadowed the work the coming Great High Priest would do.* The High Priest to come would also be driven by zeal for God's house, driven by zeal for the holiness of God's people. To wash away sin from the midst of God's people, this Great High Priest would also shed blood –*His own blood*– and so "make atonement for the children of Israel." His work would be effective; through the sacrifice of His own blood, this Great High Priest would free the people of God *of all ages and places* from the curse our sins bring upon ourselves. It is the zeal and the resulting action of the Great High Priest Jesus Christ that Phinehas foreshadowed through his actions. God's attention, then, was directed to the coming sacrifice on Calvary, and *that's why God stopped the plague.*

What we have here then, congregation? Balak king of Moab, driven by hell, sought to destroy Israel. Balaam the sorcerer, driven by hell, gave cunning advice as to how God's wrath might be attracted to Israel. King Balak –how hell rejoiced!– succeeded; as the plague killed its thousands in the camp, a hardened young covenant child dared to swagger in with his unholy catch.... *The only antidote to the full load of God's holy wrath falling on the camp was the blood of Jesus Christ!* Jesus' zeal, Jesus' sacrifice is God's answer to the cunning of hell! Balak would fight the battle on the spiritual level, but *God replied in kind*; the day came when He sent His only Son into the world, a Son so full of zeal for God that He fought the devil single-handedly on the cross *and triumphed* –how hell grinds its teeth in frustration!– then laid down His life so that the sins of His people might be washed away and so the

curse removed from God's own. Over against "Balaam's advice", so hideous and deadly, God put the gospel of Jesus Christ, so glorious and life giving. See there, beloved, what kind of God you have!

Satan, crafty devil that he is, continues to scheme, to whisper "Balaam's advice" into our ears –befriend the world (and so provoke God's judgment)– and so we have the responsibility to be on our guard. At the same time, beloved of the Lord, we may not consider the wiles of the devil to be so dangerous that we have no chance of survival. For our Saviour has defeated the devil! More, the Saviour has obtained for us the gospel of forgiveness for our sins and the good news of Father's favour. More still, He has poured out His Holy Spirit to enlighten us and guide us in the battles of faith. Here are opportunities with which we need to work!

Moses was angry with the officers of Israel because they spared the women of the Midianites, the very persons who caused the children of Israel to trespass in the incident of Peor. Judgment had to fall on these women because of the danger they formed for Israel; Moses commanded their death (31:17). And there, beloved, is foreshadowed the destruction of all God's enemies and ours on the last day. As Balaam's death foreshadowed Satan's defeat on Calvary, so the death of Israel's enemies foreshadows the fact that all those on the other side of the Antithesis will be swept off this earth. When Christ comes again on the clouds of heaven, there shall remain on this earth only those who love God and His Christ. That will be the end also of the counsel of Balaam; in the New Jerusalem there is no place left for Satan's side to build bridges to the children of God, and no place either for the children of God to fall for this temptation – and so bring God's wrath upon ourselves. In the New Jerusalem shall be only peace, only God's favour, for there shall be no temptation, not even the insidious "counsel of Balaam".

Since that is the future Christ guarantees, I shall today make it my business in today's world of tolerance to resist the counsel of Balaam, and maintain the antithesis against the unbelieving and perishing world.