

Balaam and the Talking Donkey

A pagan prophet's donkey sees the angel of the Lord and speaks, saving Balaam's life and leading to blessings instead of curses on Israel.

Numbers 22:1-41 • Numbers 23:1-30 • Numbers 24:1-25

CHARACTERS: Balaam, Balak, The Donkey, Angel of the Lord

THEMES: God's Sovereignty, Obedience, Divine Protection, Blessings

AS ISRAEL CAMPED on the plains of Moab, King Balak was terrified. He had seen what Israel did to the Amorites and knew he could not defeat them in battle. So he sent messengers to Balaam, a prophet known for his powerful curses, offering rich rewards if he would come and curse Israel.

God came to Balaam in the night and said, 'You must not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed.' Balaam refused to go. But when Balak sent more distinguished princes with promises of great honor, Balaam asked God again. God permitted him to go, but only to speak what God would tell him.

Balaam set out on his donkey. But the angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him, sword drawn and ready. The donkey saw the angel and turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat her to get her back on the road. The angel stood again in a narrow path between vineyard walls. The donkey pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot. He beat her again. Finally, the angel stood where there was no room to turn. The donkey lay down under Balaam, and he beat her with his staff.

Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth. 'What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?' she asked. Balaam answered angrily, 'You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword, I would kill you!'

The donkey said, 'Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?' 'No,' Balaam admitted.

Then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel with drawn sword. He fell facedown. The angel said, 'Why have you beaten your donkey three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is reckless. The donkey saw me and turned away. If she had not, I would certainly have killed you by now.'

Balaam confessed his sin and offered to go back. But the angel said, 'Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you.'

Three times Balak took Balaam to overlook the Israelite camps, hoping for a curse. Three times Balaam opened his mouth and blessed Israel instead. 'How can I curse those whom God has not cursed?' he declared. His final oracle spoke of a star rising from Jacob and a scepter from Israel—a prophecy pointing to the coming Messiah.

Balak was furious, but God had turned the intended curses into blessings, protecting His people through most unexpected means—a speaking donkey and a pagan prophet who could only speak God's words.