

## 9. The lesson from a donkey

January 26, 2012

Just about all of you remember an old TV sitcom "Mr. Ed" that showed a talking horse. There are a few recent movies that portray animals speaking to humans in human language, such as "Dr. Dolittle".

I am so glad that animals don't speak, of course, my neighbor's dumb dog barks day and night including in the middle of night. If they could speak, it would be very noisy all over the world, don't you think?

We sometimes use the phrase "dumb animals," but we find out that a donkey was smarter than a rebellious master who was going against the Lord's command. This is the most unique incident in the Bible, if not in the history of the universe, an animal speaking to a man who should have known better.

### A. THE BRONZE SERPENT

*Numbers 21:4-9 Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. 5 And the people spoke against God and against Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread." 6 So the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died. 7 Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord that He take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. 8 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." 9 So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.*

The Israelites defeated the Canaanites at Hormah with help from the Lord, but courage in the battle must be followed by endurance in the race. Otherwise, it would be a short lived victory in one battle of a long war.

It didn't take long before the difficulty of the march made the people impatient and they started complaining against the Lord and His spokesperson Moses again. The word "worthless" they used was full of contempt against the Lord. These people had gotten so accustomed to their blessings from the Lord that they detested it and called it "worthless".

They rejected God's gift of life and health from heaven, so He sent them suffering and death from the earth, and many of them died. The word "fiery" in Hebrew is "saraph" which means "burning". I wouldn't be surprised if the serpents were poisonous with their venom and gave torturous death to the Israelites. In the OT typology, bronze represents 'God's judgment'; and serpent represents 'devil' or 'sin'.

Jesus used the bronze serpent to illustrate His own death on the cross in John 3 as we already studied it before:

*John 3:14-15 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.*

All people have been infected by sin and will one day die and face judgment, but if they look by faith to Christ, He will save them and give them eternal life. Looking to the bronze serpent saved people from physical death, but looking to Christ saves us from eternal death.

Just as nobody could look at the bronze serpent for another person; each dying sinner had to look for himself or herself. The salvation Christ offers is personal and individual, and each of us must look to Christ by faith.

Sin and death came into this world through a longing look of Eve to the forbidden fruit, and the only deliverance from sin and eternal death is by a look of faith.

*Isaiah 45:22 "Look to Me, and be saved, All you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.*

Some people in the Israel camp might have said, "It is a foolish remedy," or "It is too simple." Guess what? Those same excuses are used today to reject the loving invitation of Jesus Christ to the unbelievers around the world.

Sadly, even this God-ordained symbol was made into an idol. In the reforms of king Hezekiah, he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made because until those days the Israelites burned incense to it, and called it "Nehushtan" according to 2 Kings 18:4. Fallen man can take any good and glorious thing from God and find an idolatrous use for it. Yes, we are very good at doing it.

## **B. WHICH PART OF 'NO' DO YOU NOT UNDERSTAND?**

*Numbers 22:7-13 So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the diviner's fee in their hand, and they came to Balaam and spoke to him the words of Balak. 8 And he said to them, "Lodge here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, as the Lord speaks to me." So the princes of Moab stayed with Balaam. 9 Then God came to Balaam and said, "Who are these men with you?" 10 So Balaam said to God, "Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent to me, saying, 11 'Look, a people has come out of Egypt, and they cover the face of the earth. Come now, curse them for me; perhaps I shall be able to overpower them and drive them out.'" 12 And God said to Balaam, "You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed." 13 So Balaam rose in the morning and said to the princes of Balak, "Go back to your land, for the Lord has refused to give me permission to go with you."*

The Moabites and Midianites were very frightened due to the presence of a new threat, the Israelites which won battles after battles against the neighboring nations. Since they couldn't fight against them conventionally, they wanted to have help from the devil through a famous occultic soothsayer, Balaam who was living in Pethor near the Euphrates River – about 400 miles away from them.

In those days, people believed that each nation had its own god, and Balaam knew that Jehovah was the God of the Israelites. Therefore, he went to seek the will of Israel God about the summons from Balak. It was God who came to Balaam, not Balaam who brought God to himself.

Just in case some of you think, "If Balaam was not a believer, how could he call on the Lord?" Remember the medium who attempted to bring the spirit of dead Samuel to Saul in 1 Samuel 28? God allowed Samuel's spirit to appear in front of her and

scared snot out of her. She just didn't expect the real dead Samuel's spirit to show up.

The Lord didn't want Balaam to curse on Israel and He made it very clear. However, that is not the answer what this soothsayer wanted to hear. But he didn't have a choice but to stand down at this point. Right here, Balaam should have ended this negotiation. But he was glutton for punishment.

*Numbers 22:20-36 And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If the men come to call you, rise and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you--that you shall do." 21 So Balaam rose in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the princes of Moab. 22 Then God's anger was aroused because he went, and the Angel of the Lord took His stand in the way as an adversary against him. And he was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. 23 Now the donkey saw the Angel of the Lord standing in the way with His drawn sword in His hand, and the donkey turned aside out of the way and went into the field. So Balaam struck the donkey to turn her back onto the road. 24 Then the Angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on this side and a wall on that side. 25 And when the donkey saw the Angel of the Lord, she pushed herself against the wall and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall; so he struck her again. 26 Then the Angel of the Lord went further, and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left. 27 And when the donkey saw the Angel of the Lord, she lay down under Balaam; so Balaam's anger was aroused, and he struck the donkey with his staff. 28 Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" 29 And Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have abused me. I wish there were a sword in my hand, for now I would kill you!" 30 So the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden, ever since I became yours, to this day? Was I ever disposed to do this to you?" And he said, "No." 31 Then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the Angel of the Lord standing in the way with His drawn sword in His hand; and he bowed his head and fell flat on his face. 32 And the Angel of the Lord said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to stand against you, because your way is perverse before Me. 33 The donkey saw Me and turned aside from Me these three times. If she had not turned aside from Me, surely I would also have killed you by now, and let her live." 34 And Balaam said to the Angel of the Lord, "I have sinned, for I did not know You stood in the way against me. Now therefore, if it displeases You, I will turn back." 35 Then the Angel of the Lord said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but only the word that I speak to you, that you shall speak." So Balaam went with the princes of Balak.*

Some might think this was unfair, seeing that God told Balaam to go and then was angry and wanted to kill this "poor" soothsayer because he went. But Balaam only went because he had first rejected God's voice, both in conscience and clear command, and God should be angry about that.

The donkey was more spiritually perceptive than the master. The donkey had no spiritual gifts, but at least acknowledged his Creator. The soothsayer had spiritual gifts, but also a disobedient heart and walk.

There are times we have nothing but a tunnel vision for what we want so bad that we are willing to go against the Lord who loves us so much. The end result of our stubbornness is paying consequence of our dumb decision and action miserably. Is it worth it?

Remember what I have said many times before? The worst thing the Lord can do for us is allowing us to have our way. We can bury ourselves under the truck load of worthless things and consequences. We are just good at that.

By the way, whenever you see the phrase "the Angel of the Lord" in the OT, it is what we call "Chistophany" which means an appearance of Jesus Christ in the OT.

In chapter 23 and 24, Balaam gave four prophecies regarding Israel as the Lord put His words in this disobedient soothsayer's mouth. There are some important points we should notice, but we are going to learn about them at some other time.

### **C. ISRAEL'S GROSS SIN IN MOAB**

*Numbers 25:1-13 Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. 2 They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. 3 So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor, and the anger of the Lord was aroused against Israel. 4 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of the people and hang the offenders before the Lord, out in the sun, that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel." 5 So Moses said to the judges of Israel, "Every one of you kill his men who were joined to Baal of Peor." 6 And indeed, one of the children of Israel came and presented to his brethren a Midianite woman in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel, who were weeping at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. 7 Now when Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose from among the congregation and took a javelin in his hand; 8 and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her body. So the plague was stopped among the children of Israel. 9 And those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand. 10 Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 11 "Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the children of Israel, because he was zealous with My zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My zeal. 12 Therefore say, 'Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace; 13 and it shall be to him and his descendants after him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel.'"*

Balaam wasn't able to curse Israel, but he knew how to defile them and seduce them into sin so great that God of Israel would judge them. According to Numbers 31:16, Balaam suggested to Balak that the Moabites and Midianites convene a religious feast to honor Baal, and that they invite the Jews to attend. The feast, of course, would involve idolatry and abominable immorality and would be a complete violation of Israel's covenant with the Lord.

You would expect this nation Israel would remember what happened in Mount Sinai when they committed this kind of sin of idolatry and immorality around the gold calf while Moses was up in the mountain. But they didn't. Sin not only makes us be stupid by thinking that we can get away with it, but also makes us forget the previous blessings from the Lord and consequences of our own sins.

## **D. BALAAM AND TODAY'S CHURCH**

As the followers of Jesus Christ, we must not think that this OT incident is not past history and simply an interesting fanciful donkey speaking story. This is written for us as a warning against our disobedience.

### **1) The way of Balaam**

*2 Peter 2:15-16 They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; 16 but he was rebuked for his iniquity: a dumb donkey speaking with a man's voice restrained the madness of the prophet.*

As a soothsayer and false prophet of an occult, Balaam was none other than a hireling. His motive was to make money and used his religion to enrich his wealth and entice people to sin.

Apostle Peter promises that God will judge these deceivers, but he also warns the believers to exercise spiritual discernment, otherwise, they will be taken captive by false doctrines.

*Ephesians 4:14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting*

Unfortunately it happens all the time. The Emergent Church movement, the Seeker Sensitive movement, and now homosexuality is flooding into Christianity very strong. Many liberal denominations embraced homosexuality as a lifestyle, while some others choose not to talk about this controversial subject from the pulpit.

In my opinion and according to what the Bible says, there is nothing controversial about it. It is wrong, period. That should be the end of it. Anyone who practices homosexuality must repent from it just like any of our other sins. There is no forgiveness from the Lord unless a sinner repents and turns away from it.

As you already have noticed that religion is big business today, even secular businesses acknowledge it and they want a portion of the pie. It is easy for pastors, Bible teachers, musicians, writers and others in Christian industries to become more concerned with money and fame they can get than spiritual values and Christian characters they present.

### **2) The error of Balaam**

*Jude 11 Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah.*

What Jude wrote pretty much echoes what Peter wrote in chapter 2 of 2 Peter. So we should consider them as a double warning from the Lord.

From gaudy and showy TV evangelists who beg for money in every other sentence to some pastors who embrace the flavors of eastern religions and the New Age concepts as new hot potatoes, the air waves are filled with their spiritual garbage. We must discern what we hear like the people of Berea from Acts 17 and compare their teachings to the Bible every time.

### **3) The doctrine of Balaam**

*Revelation 2:14 But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling*

*block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality*

The problem at Pergamos was that the false teachers had gotten into the church and were enticing people to attend the feasts at the idol temples. The doctrine of Balaam is the lie that it is permissible for saved people to live like unsaved people, that God's grace gives us the right to disobey God's Law.

According to Jeremiah 2, Hosea 1-2, and many other verses in the OT, God and Israel were married at Sinai. This same "marriage" image is applied to Jesus Christ and His church in the NT. When a believer commits a sin and continuously lives in sin, it is like a wife committing adultery against her husband.

Any teaching that makes it easy and permissible to sin is false doctrine, because the Word of God was given to us to enable us to live holy.

### ***E.APPLICATIONS***

- 1) We must discern what we hear like the people of Berea from Acts 17 and compare their teachings to the Word of God every time.
- 2) We must stay away from any teaching that makes it easy and permissible to sin is false doctrine, because the Word of God was given to us to enable us to live holy.

# 10. Joshua the successor

February 2, 2012

"You are a bunch of liberals. Your faith in Jesus Christ is compromised by your carnal life. You should be ashamed of yourself in the way you honor the Lord," that is what John Knox, D. L. Moody, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and C.S. Lewis would say to us if they had a chance to see not just our congregation only, but also all the 21st Century Christians in general.

It has been said that every local church is only one generation away from its extinction. More and more denominations embrace carnal and ungodly things on the horizon as something they think they must do. They no longer have the Christian standard that they honor. To them, just about everything is acceptable under the banner of God's grace and love.

It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said, "Cheap grace is our church's deadly enemy. Costly grace is the Gospel which must be sought again and again. Such grace is costly because it costs one's life; it is grace because it cost God His Son's life. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon His son to be too dear a price to pay for our life."

To be very honest with you, I am very concerned about our next generation – I am talking about 20-40 years old – in our congregation. I have not seen anyone whom I can trust to pass the pastoral torch to. At least not yet.

In tonight's study, Moses was preparing to pass his torch to his trusted servant Joshua in the presence of the Lord and the entire congregation of Israel. At the same time, we see other important lessons we can learn from the Lord.

## A. THE SECOND CENSUS OF ISRAEL

*Numbers 26:1-4 And it came to pass, after the plague, that the Lord spoke to Moses and Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest, saying: 2 "Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel from twenty years old and above, by their fathers' houses, all who are able to go to war in Israel." 3 So Moses and Eleazar the priest spoke with them in the plains of Moab by the Jordan, across from Jericho, saying: 4 "Take a census of the people from twenty years old and above, just as the Lord commanded Moses and the children of Israel who came out of the land of Egypt."*

By the time Israel had entered the Zared valley as it mentioned in this chapter, the old generation had died off, except for Moses, Caleb, and Joshua. And very soon, Moses would die. Israel was making a new beginning, thanks to the faithfulness and mercy of God. It was time to take a census of the new generation and start looking toward the future.

Actually, the transition between chapter 25 and 26 reminds us of the transition from chapter 14 to 15, because in both of them the Lord moved from judgment to mercy, from punishment to promise.

For the first census, the Lord wanted Moses to know how many men were available to fight, 20 years and older. But for the second census, the Lord wanted Moses to know how many people were in each tribe so that he could divide up the Promised Land so that they could claim their inheritance.