

A TWO-FACED PROPHET

"Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like His." Numbers 23:10

"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." II Peter 2:15

From the twenty-second chapter of Numbers we learn that, once in the long ago, "the children of Israel set forth, and pitched in the plains of Moab on this Jordan by Jericho... And Moab was sore afraid of the people, because they were many: and Moab was distressed because of the children of Israel." The people of Moab didn't want the Israelites there, because they knew what they had done to others. The Moabites inquired, "What will we do?" Balak, their king, who was terrified at the approach of the Israelites as he contemplated the worst consequences to himself and his people, began to consider what defense could be made. Before attempting the use of arms, he was desirous of securing a blessing on himself and his people, and a curse upon his enemies through the incantations of Balaam, which he thought would be effectual.

Balaam dwelt in Pethor, a town of Mesopotamia on the banks of the Euphrates River. Like his father, he practiced sooth-saying among his people. He had acquired fame as one who was endowed with the power of foreseeing the future. His endowments placed him in the rank of the foremost men of his time. In him were united towering ambition, insatiate love of power, a ravenous appetite for sensual pleasure, and a rapacious greediness for gain.

Alarmed at the progress of the Israelites, and convinced that they were led by a supernatural power, the king of Moab inferred that they could not be resisted by mere human agency. In the trying emergency, he sent messengers to Balaam, with the reward of divination in their hands, saying, "Come now, therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people; for they are too mighty for me: peradventure I shall prevail, that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land: for I wot that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed." Numbers 22:6. Balaam was not an obscure man. He was known throughout the region as one whose blessing or curse carried power with it. He was one whom kings approached with respectful urgency and with magnificent offers.

In response to the request of the messengers, Balaam declined to accept the invitation until he had consulted the will of God, by which alone he declared he would be governed. God gave a clear and definite answer to the magician, "Thou shalt not go with them; thou shalt not curse the people: for they are blessed." Balaam, therefore, peremptorily refused to visit the king of Moab; and the messengers were dismissed.

When Balak received the information of Balaam's refusal, proceeding on the theory that every man has his price, he sent even more honorable princes to insist that Balaam accept his invitation. Cognizant of Balaam's mercenary disposition, the king dispatched the second embassy to him with a design to flatter his pride, as well as to work upon his avarice.

A splendid retinue, clothed in oriental magnificence, stood before the humble dwelling of Balaam, bearing an urgent message from a mighty monarch. These men of exalted rank entreated his attendance, and urged their request by promises of great preferment, of riches and honor, to the utmost extent of his wishes. They said unto him, "Thus saith Balak, the son of Zippor, Let nothing, I pray thee, hinder thee from coming unto me; For I will promote thee unto very great honor, and I will do whatsoever thou sayest unto me: Come therefore, I pray thee, and curse me this people."

Being unwilling to forget all these advantages, Balaam began to waiver because he was covetous. He requested the messengers to tarry until he consulted God as to His will

in this matter. What was there for him to ask of the Lord? He had already pronounced an irrevocable decision, and He would not reverse it. Did Balaam think that the circumstances of Balak's sending a second time, and offering him a bribe, would influence God to change His decision in the matter? He wanted to go. He was not satisfied with God's answer. Perhaps there are traces of that same tendency in us. It is not natural for us to accept one utterance of God as decisive when it clashes with our own purpose. Balaam wanted God to open some way whereby he could accomplish his own pleasure, and at the same time keep within the limits of obedience. "His endeavor was not to please God, but to please self, without displeasing God."

When Balaam asked God the second time about his acceptance of the invitation, he was not asking to know what was right, but rather for the privilege of doing what he knew to be wrong. He was very eager to go to Balak, because he wanted the promotion, the honor, and the money. He also wanted to stay on good terms with God. So his prayer was simply begging God for an indulgence. He was asking to be allowed to do a known wrong. God had made His will perfectly plain to him, and yet Balaam was trying to get the Lord to change His mind. He wanted to get the gold of Moab and to please himself, and yet, if possible, to do so with the Lord's permission.

To go or not to go, that was the question. In Balaam's conscience, a tremendous struggle was taking place. But the loud call of the inner voice was soon silenced. He convinced himself that the thing he once thought was wrong had come to be right. He yielded to his over-mastering desire and decided to go to Balak; so, the very next morning he departed on his journey. How prompt men are to move when they are carrying out their own wishes! But God's anger was kindled against him because he went. God had told him not to go but because of his determination to do so, God permitted it; however, God's will remained unchanged. It was no different when He permitted Balaam to go than when He refused him the privilege of doing so. God permitted him to go with the princes of Moab, and yet was displeased with him for going.

In this respect, God dealt with him just as He deals with us. He allows us to go in the way of temptations and of disobedience, if such be our choice. Through His Word and by His Spirit, He makes known to us His will, but at the same time He gives us an opportunity to disobey Him. In substance, He tells us that we can go, if we are determined to do so, but the consequences for so doing must rest upon us. If we walk in the pathway of disobedience, we have no right to ask Him for His protecting grace.

After Balaam proceeded on his journey, the animal upon which he was riding saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, whereupon she turned out of the way into a path between two walls at a vineyard. While Balaam tried to compel the frightened beast to advance, she crushed his foot against the wall. In his anger he beat the animal until the cause of her fright was disclosed to him. Thus God refused to permit Balaam to proceed without a signal testimony of his displeasure. After various and fruitless efforts to force the beast upon which he rode to go forward, the Scripture says that Balaam "was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man's voice forbad the madness of the prophet." II Peter 2:16. This was a most singular miracle indeed. An animal, of all others the most stupid, was used to reprove the wise of the earth. Still Balaam was intent upon pursuing his journey. Finally, "The Lord opened his eyes and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand," as if prepared to destroy him. And the angel said, "Behold he went out to withstand thee, because thy way is perverse before me." Balaam was frightened, and falling to the ground made a confession of his guilt and a conditional proposal to change his purpose, saying, "I have sinned; for I knew not that thou stoodest in the way against me: now therefore, if it displease thee, I will get me back again. But the angel of the Lord said, "Go with the men."

When Balaam reached the borders of Moab where Israel lay encamped, he had the king of Moab build seven altars, from which the spirals of smoke ascended toward heaven. Then bidding Balak stand by the altars, Balaam went up to the top of the mountain to learn what God would have him say. Disappointed and disgusted at the outcome of his plans to have Israel cursed, Balak dismissed Balaam without gold or honor, and sent him back to his own country. The more you look at Balaam and study him, the more modern he appears. He is a timeless type of a man who tries to serve God and Mammon.

Reflect upon the moral condition of this man during his life. He was blessed with a knowledge such as had been granted to but a few of his contemporaries. He knew that the Israelites were the people of God acting under his immediate supervision while the Moabites were the enemies of God, idolaters of the basest type, cruel, sensual, and vindictive. Knowing all this, it was his earnest desire to destroy the children of God, and to aid in the triumph of their enemies. By every device in his power, by sacrifices without number, and by every art of divination, he sought, with perseverance, to accomplish his objective. And all this was done for the infamous purpose of rising to power and revelling in wealth.

Balaam craved honor. He built altars, used enchantments, and uttered high sounding phrases to call the attention to others unto himself. He wanted to be considered some great person. He was selfish. He was controlled by avarice. He loved the wages of unrighteousness. He looked upon his unusual gifts as something to commercialize for self-advancement and personal glory. He was willfully disobedient to God.

Even though Balaam was a base man, he was not a fool. He had thoughts of death. He did not shut his eyes to what he did not like. He believed that he would die, and he had desires about it; and though those desires were never realized, but the reverse, yet he had intelligence enough to gaze upon the tents of God's chosen Israel, and to say from his heart, "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!" The author of this memorable prayer did not die the death of the righteous, but by his own deliberate choice he died fighting against the righteous. He who prayed that he might die the death of the righteous died as their enemy and corrupter. We have two epitaphs for him in the Bible. One is, "Balaam, the son of Bosor; who loved the wages of unrighteousness." The other is, "Balaam who taught Balak to cast a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication."

From the day Balaam received the invitation from the king of Moab until that fatal day when he lay dead and dishonored among the Midianites, he was repeatedly warned and went to his doom over a series and succession of obstacles, judgments, and warnings. In his case, there was the plain Word of God, the speech of the ass, the crushed foot, the sword of the angel, and yet over it all, Balaam rode roughshod to a dishonored grave.

Although the prospect of much honor and much gold rose before the imagination of the greedy seer, he proceeded step by step to "blow out the lights within his soul." We are not surprised at the outcome. He did not die the death of the righteous as he had wished; he died the death of the wicked and the dishonorable.

No man ought to expect, or to hope, to die the death of the righteous who will not lead the life of the righteous. Why should any one expect to come to a good death who will not lead a good life? Every man dies as he has lived. Many today would like to go to heaven when they die, but they refuse to be Christians while they live. Don't expect to die the death of the righteous if you are unwilling to live the life of the righteous.