

Balaam is one of those people that is well known in the Bible, because everyone knows him as the prophet with the talking donkey. But he is more than just that, because Balaam also gives us an important prophecy of a coming king. And that's what we focus on for our reading for tonight.

Because there was once a king by the name of Balak. Balak was the king of Moab, and he had a very serious problem. Israel had come up out of Egypt and was now camping on the outskirts of his land. He had to do something about them, but he didn't want to just let them pass through the way that they offered to do. He wanted to deal with them once and for all, so that they wouldn't be a future problem. But Balak couldn't just attack Israel. Israel was too big. Israel was too strong. After all, they had just defeated his neighbors, the Amorites, so he had to do something else. Balak sent a message to the prophet Balaam asking him to come and to curse Israel, because Balak figured if God was on his side maybe he'd have a chance. If God was on his side, he could win that upcoming battle. He could destroy Israel and eliminate the problem forever.

But think about what that would mean, Christians. God had promised, after all, to Abraham that through Israel would come blessing to the entire world. And if there was no Israel, if Israel was destroyed, then there could be no blessing, because there could be no Savior. And if there was no Savior, then there would be no hope. No one would be saved. The destruction of Israel would mean the end of God's plan to save the entire world. Which, of course, is what Satan wants to happen. Satan would love nothing more than for the Church to be destroyed and to disappear entirely. And so that's why he moves the world to fight against the Church, just as he now moves Balak to fight against Israel. We have come to a critical moment in the history of God's people. What is going to happen next?

And if you go by what Balaam says in the book of Numbers, you would think that maybe he was actually a pretty good guy. Balaam says things like, "I can't do anything other than what God tells me to do. God told me not to curse Israel, so I'm not going to do it." It does sound pretty good on the surface. We might even think of Balaam as being a God-fearing kind of man, somebody we would expect to speak the Word of God. But the rest of the Bible actually makes it pretty clear that Balaam was anything but. He was not a good man. Balaam, we are told, was greedy, the kind of man who would be willing to do anything as long as the price was right. Balaam, we're also told, did not really know God, because it was Balaam just a little while later who would lead Israel into idolatry at Peor. He caused them to sin a very great sin. Balaam is not the kind of man we would expect to speak for God.

That's what makes his prophecy all the more remarkable, because God had taken what was intended for evil and turned it into something good. God did not let Balaam do what he wanted to do. He did not let Balaam curse Israel the way that Balak wanted him to. In fact, that was the whole point of the donkey in the first place. Balaam was on his way to do what he wanted, and God opened the mouth of the donkey to stop him on his way. In fact, 2 Peter chapter 2 says that Balaam "was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness." So out of the mouth of this enemy of God, God brings forth great blessings. And in fact, he would point towards the greatest blessing of all.

That brings us to our reading, then, for this evening. What we have here in Numbers chapter 24 is the fourth of four blessings that come out of the mouth of Balaam. Three of them were for God's people in those days: blessings of increase, blessings of strength, blessings of victory.

Which, of course, made Balak the king upset. This wasn't what he had paid him to do! But God had turned that curse into a blessing. God's people would not be defeated. God would do what he had planned to do.

But in this last blessing, there is also a great prophecy. Listen to what Balaam says: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth. Edom shall be dispossessed; Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed. Israel is doing valiantly. And one from Jacob shall exercise dominion and destroy the survivors of cities!" So in this vision that Balaam sees, he sees one far off in the future. That's why he says he sees him, but not near. He would come a long time after his days. And this one who would come would be a king, whom Balaam describes as a star and a scepter. A star is very often used in the Bible as a symbol for a king. Nebuchadnezzar, for example, in Isaiah chapter 14 is called the "daystar." Stars were symbols of strength and of power, being up in the sky where they were mighty, just like a king. And a scepter is also a symbol for a king, because it's the rod which the king holds in his hand as a symbol of his power and his might. Kings even today still have this symbol. In fact, we get a good example of this in Psalm 2, which says: "You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." So both of these things together, then, the star and the scepter, are symbols of this coming king, one who would be mighty, and one who would lead God's people.

What would this king do when he came? Balaam says that he's going to defeat his enemies. He will crush the forehead of Moab. He will break down the sons of Sheth. He will dispossess Edom, and the survivors of the cities will be destroyed. Balak the king is basically told that not only would Moab fail to defeat Israel, but Israel would defeat Moab and in fact wipe them out entirely. God was going to bring a great victory through this king. He would overcome, and his enemies would be defeated so that they would never attack God's people again.

But who is this king? Who is the star of Jacob? Who is the scepter of Israel? Because there were many kings in Israel, especially in later years, and some of those kings even conquered Moab from time to time. David, for example, defeated Moab and made it subject to him during his reign. But that victory did not last forever, because just a few generations later, Moab broke free and started causing problems again. It soon became clear that the king that Balaam was talking about was a king still yet to come, one who would bring an everlasting victory, one who would rule over a kingdom which would never come to an end.

And Christians, that king has come. The star of Jacob appeared under the sign of the star of Bethlehem. The scepter of Israel was born as the King of the Jews. Jesus is that promised king. Jesus is the one that Balaam was looking forward to. And he has come to lead his people and to shepherd them forever. But he doesn't come with a sword to conquer by force, nor does he come at the head of an army to overrun the world. Jesus has come as the everlasting Prince of Peace. He conquers through peace and through humility. Instead of war, he brings peace. Instead of conquering his enemies by force, he makes them brothers: one new people, one new man, the holy body of Christ.

Jesus has also overcome the world, Christians, and on that day when he returns, all will bow before him. And he will come to judge as the King of Kings and as the Lord of Lords. And on

that day, all things will be set right. On that day, his victory will be complete. On that day, all things will be put under his feet, and he will be all in all. On that day, there will be no more suffering. There will be no more persecution. There will be no more defeat. On that day, there will be only endless victory and a complete and perfect joy, because we will reign with him on his throne forever.

That's what Balaam saw, just a little hint of it from far away, but now the fulfillment has come. So take heart, Christians, and do not be afraid. Victory is ours, an eternal victory, because Jesus Christ has been born as the King of Kings, and his kingdom will never come to an end.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, the star of Jacob and the scepter of Israel, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, be with us through every trial, and strengthen us for the fight, because you have overcome the world; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.