

George Bell

The vision of the Almighty

The Oracles or Parables of Balaam

Numbers 22-24

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1. Numbers 23:7-10

A frightened king

We usually think of parables as being only in the New Testament. Many of them are familiar to us because they were told by the Lord Jesus. However, there are also parables in the Old Testament. On two occasions the speeches made by Job are described as parables (Job 27:1; 29:1). In Psalm 49 a parable is tantamount to a dark saying; difficult to understand without help. After all, the disciples of the Lord Jesus found some of His parables hard to take in. He had to explain them to them.

We are going to speak about Balaam's parables or oracles. There are four of these. The circumstances surrounding these parables are very strange. There is a king scared out of his wits! There were vast armies just about to invade his country, as he thought. Whatever was he to do? His description of these invaders was very graphic; this is how he describes them: 'Now this company will lick up all that is around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field' (Numbers 22:4).

King Balak was very sure that he was no match for these armies. So he sent for Balaam who lived about four hundred miles away. Balaam is mentioned in eight books of the Bible: five in the Old Testament and three in the New, therefore we must pay attention to what is said about him.

A 'prophet'

In the New Testament Balaam is referred to as a prophet (2 Peter 2:15). A very strange prophet indeed! He is also described as a soothsayer, making contact with evil spirits. We read that he sought for enchantments. It was because of his reputation in this area that Balak sent for him. Nowadays he would be known as a spiritualist medium.

Nowhere in the Bible does he get a good name. Balaam is altogether a complex character; very difficult to understand! He seems to have had a knowledge of God however perverted it may have been. Balak's plan was to hire the services of Balaam to put a curse upon the armies of Israel. Balak was in no doubt as to the latter's ability. Just listen to what he says: 'Therefore please come at once, curse this people for me, for they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed' (Numbers 22:6). We are now able to see what a devilish scheme was being worked out.

A covetous man

However, God had different thoughts. Remember that the armies which Balak was so afraid of were God's people. What could puny man do to stop them? And so, when the messengers of Balak came to Balaam, they had in their hands the rewards of divination. It is clear that Balaam was well known as a covetous man.

The prophet invited the messengers from Balak to lodge that night while he enquired of the Lord as to what his response should be. During that night God asked Balaam who these men were and what their mission was. After Balaam had told God who they were and what they were up to, God gave him a very distinct answer. Let us listen to it: 'And God said to Balaam, You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed' (Numbers 22:12). On this first attempt Balaam listened and sent the messengers back, refusing to go with them.

However, Balak was not so easily put off. He sent a second mission, this time sending princes and more honourable men. Now he promised greater honour. We should remember that God had said, 'You shall not go with them'. This should have been sufficient. But Balaam wavered and kept his visitors overnight again.

It is so obvious that it was the hope of reward that motivated him. When God saw that he was determined to go, He said: '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' (Numbers 22:20). What a serious thing it is when men are so moved by greed that they would attempt to curse the people of God. Let's think a little longer about Balaam. We have already mentioned that these events are recorded in the New Testament.

A greedy man

On two occasions he is referred to as a greedy man. 2 Peter tells us that he 'loved the wages of unrighteousness' (2 Peter 2:15). In the Epistle of Jude he is quoted as an example of men who profess to be Christian leaders who 'run greedily after the error of Balaam for reward' (Jude 11).

The Apostle Paul, when writing to his son in the faith, Timothy, speaks about some people who 'suppose that godliness is a means of gain: from such withdraw yourself. But godliness with contentment is great gain' (1 Timothy 6:5-6). This is good advice.

Coming back to our story, God does all He can to turn the prophet from his evil design. He puts the angel of the Lord in his way. There are many who believe that this angel is a presentation of the Son of God in Old Testament times before the Incarnation. Balaam did not at first see this angel. However, his donkey saw it and

stopped in its tracks. This made Balaam angry with it and he treated it brutally. The donkey rebuked the madness of the prophet, speaking with human voice. But he still went on.

The first blessing

We must come now to the first oracle. Balak must have thought that he had Balaam where he wanted him. But it must have shaken him when the prophet answered him in such a forceful way: 'How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how shall I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced?' (Numbers 23:8).

The position they took up to view God's people is very interesting: 'from the top of the rocks I see him' (Numbers 23:9). It is evident that he could see the whole camp from this vantage point settled just outside the borders of Moab. But the top of the rocks suggests that he saw the armies of Israel from God's point of view. It is a good thing to get away from the thoughts of men and their opinions sometimes. Even with ourselves as Christians there are times when we become discouraged and self occupied. We think the world is falling apart. The top of the rocks speaks of the stability of God's purpose.

The rocks

There is something immovable about rocks. I remember my wife and I spending a holiday in Devon some years ago. As most people do, we visited Dartmoor and saw those great rocks. They call them 'tors', don't they? We partly climbed up Haytor. We both had an impression of something absolutely immovable. That is one of the lessons we learn from the rocks.

It also says: 'and from the hills I behold him' (Numbers 23:9). The hills speak of a clear atmosphere where we think soberly. If the rocks speak of stability, the hills tell of a place where we can understand God's thoughts of grace towards His people. Psalm 139 was written by David, and he says: 'How precious also are Your thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them!' (Psalm 139:17).

It is very good to see other believers as God sees them. Let us think about this for a moment! How does God see believers in the Lord Jesus Christ? The Apostle Paul, in his letters, very often uses the expression 'in Christ'. He even says we were 'chosen in Him before the foundation of the world' (Ephesians 1:4). It is one of the easiest things in the world to find fault and criticise one another. Christians have been transferred, through God's purpose and grace, to a new position. This is the way we can apply the top of the rocks position to ourselves.

In the first place, our passage refers to the nation of Israel. How did God regard that nation? Earlier, in the book of Exodus, they are said to be His 'peculiar treasure' (Exodus 19:5). There was no way that Balaam could curse this people! So much for the top of the rocks. I can remember, some years ago, giving a talk on this Scripture. I had said something to the effect that it was a good thing to be with Balaam on the top of the rocks. During the interval between the meetings an elderly Christian came to me. He said, 'I agree that it is a good thing to be on the top of the rocks, but I wouldn't like to be in the company of Balaam'. I was duly ticked off! I never said that again!

What Balaam said

Let us go on a little further now. We have thought of his position, let us think now of what he said. It is worth noting that, before this incident began, we read: 'Then the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth'. Balaam was intent on the reward he was going to get. But he could not do a thing about it.

The blessing itself consists of four short statements. They are not long, but very telling! Let us deal with the first one: 'The people shall dwell alone'. This refers in the first place to the nation of Israel. God separated them to be His own peculiar people. The word 'peculiar' means a 'people for a possession'. You might be surprised to find this expression used in the New Testament about Christians. Listen to it: 'Our Saviour Jesus Christ; who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works' (Titus 2:14). If we think of Israel as a nation, they were to be a sanctified people. This is equally true of believers in Christ. Much is said in the New Testament about sanctification. The word means 'set apart'.

Second statement

The next part of the blessing says: 'And shall not be reckoned among the nations'. Israel were to be a separate people. It will be of interest to see that this manner of God's dealing with men started with Abraham. Following the flood in Noah's days, only the eight souls preserved in the ark peopled the earth. God made a covenant that He would never again destroy the earth with a flood. The sign of this covenant was the rainbow. Do we think of this when we see the rainbow? God is faithful to His word.

But it wasn't long before men turned to the most terrible idolatry. Worse than that, they built the tower of Babel, making an attempt to dethrone God. What was God to do now? The answer is that He called Abraham out from Ur of the Chaldees, which was a land given up to the worship of idols. God promised the land of Canaan

to Abraham's descendants, although Abraham himself never possessed any of it. All he had was his tent and his altar and we are told that he called on the name of the LORD. Abraham became the great example of faith.

God has never stopped working in this way! Springing from Abraham came the nation of Israel when they were brought out of bondage in Egypt. One of the later prophets wrote about this: 'Out of Egypt have I called my son'. Just as Abram had been called out of Ur of the Chaldees, so the nation was called out of Egypt.

They were to be separate from the nations around them. These nations were steeped in idolatry and all the evils that went along with it. Israel was to be a witness that Jehovah was the true God. The sad story is that Israel became like the other nations, worshipping idols also. They did not bear a faithful witness for God. It was because of this that Israel was eventually taken into captivity to Babylon. It should be said, however, that God never intended that Israel should look down on the Gentiles. They should have brought the knowledge of God to them.

Let us move on a bit further. What about ourselves as Christians? We belong to the Church! The first mention of the Church is in Matthew chapter 16 verse 18. The Lord Jesus was addressing Peter who had confessed Him saying: 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'. Jesus said unto him: 'And I say also unto you, that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it'. We have said that God has consistently worked in the same way as He did in Abraham's time. Let us think about the word 'Church'. The meaning of the word is 'called out of'.

So believers who form part of the Church today are called to be separate from the world. This does not mean we are to be hermits or shut ourselves in a monastery. We are to be active, pointing men to Christ. When the Lord Jesus was here, referring to His disciples, He said: 'They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world' (John 17:14). However, before going back to His Father, He gave them a commission, and said: 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature' (Mark 16:15). The world of pleasure seeking and money making should have no attraction for the Christian. But there is a world of men and women in need of the Gospel. We should be diligent in this respect!

Third statement

The third part of the blessing is given in the form of a question: 'Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number one-fourth of Israel?' When God undertakes to bless, He does so abundantly. In the book of Genesis, God promised Abraham that his seed would be as the stars in heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore.

In our verse the metaphor 'dust' is used. The idea in these expressions tells of what is countless. In the book of Revelation we read of 'a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands' (Revelation 7:9). What a day that will be! It may be that, in this oracle, Israel is in focus. Think of their turmoil at the present day. Blessing in a large way will be their privilege in that future day.

The Lord Jesus told a parable about a certain man who made a great supper. There were many guests invited. When it was all prepared he sent a servant to say: 'Come, for all things are now ready' (Luke 14:17). The strange thing is, they didn't want to come! So they all made excuses.

People are like that nowadays when they hear the Gospel. They are so busy with their own lives that they are not interested. So there was a call to others to come. But yet there was room. Then the servant was told 'to go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in that my house may be filled' (Luke 14:23). The gospel invitation is the same today and goes out to all, Jew and Gentile alike. The call is to come! Every thing has been prepared. Only trust and believe.

Fourth statement

As we close this chapter, let us think of Balaam's fourth expression. This is very solemn: 'Let me die the death of the righteous'. Alas, he was not prepared to live the life of the righteous. He came to a sad end, still in the company of God's enemies. As Christians, let us live so that we may enjoy the blessing of God now, and look forward to its full enjoyment in eternity.

2. Numbers 23:18-24

A more limited view of Israel

Poor Balak, the first part of his scheme did not work out! As we saw in our first chapter, he had sent for Balaam to put a curse on the armies he was so afraid of. His confidence in the famous soothsayer must have been badly shaken. Balaam had done the very opposite to what Balak wanted. He was not able to curse these armies; he had blessed them. Just listen to Balak: 'What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and look, you have blessed them bountifully' (Numbers 23:11).

In spite of this setback, Balak went on and suggested that they go to another place to see the armies of Israel: 'You shall not see them all; curse them for me from there'. Was he so foolish as to think that if they took a more limited view of God's people that would make any difference? How very little these two men really knew of God!

The unchangeable God

The question we have raised is answered by Balaam a few verses down the chapter. Let us listen to Balaam's words: 'God is not a man, that He should lie; nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?' Just think of these words coming from this wicked prophet, Balaam.

Let us just forget this incident for a while and relate these words to ourselves. God will always remain faithful to His word. There are times when circumstances press in upon us and our faith in God weakens and we become depressed. We should not forget the unchangeable God. What He promises to do, He will fulfil! The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans chapter 11, writes of the unfaithfulness of Israel. He goes on to say that as far as God's promises to them were concerned: 'The gifts and calling of God are without repentance' (Romans 11:29).

Just think again of Paul's words in another place, this time directly concerning Christians: 'In hope of eternal life, which God that cannot lie promised before the world began' (Titus 1:2). We need in our day to rest entirely upon God's word.

A justified people

In our first chapter we were thinking of God's people as sanctified, that is, as set apart for Himself. Let us recall the expression: 'The people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations' (Numbers 23:9). God's love was set upon them.

In the second oracle another truth comes to light. Listen to the next part of this blessing: 'He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, nor has He seen wickedness in Israel' (Numbers 23:21). Just take account of that! Was there ever a people who had tried God's patience like Israel? The very fact that it took forty years for them to travel from Egypt to where they were now, speaks loudly. It was because of their unbelief.

On another occasion, had it not been for the intercession of Moses, they would have been wiped out. We read in the letter to the Hebrews: 'Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the

wilderness?' (Hebrews 3:17). It was a new generation that encamped in the plains of Moab. The only two who had left Egypt and entered the land of Canaan were Caleb and Joshua.

Think again of these words. I am going to quote them again: 'He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, nor has He seen wickedness in Israel'. This is how God saw them. It is not now God's 'sanctified people'. It is His 'justified people'. They were as perfect as God could make them. Although the word justify is found in the Old Testament, it is really a New Testament truth. It is based on the death and resurrection of Christ. It is at the very heart of the Christian faith.

Redemption by blood

However, leading up to these blessings, there were two experiences which Israel passed through. As Christians, we are able to see them as pictures of the Lord's death. The first of these was at the time of their release from bondage in Egypt (Exodus 12). They had spent four hundred years there under severe servitude and cruelty with very little hope of freedom. Pharaoh was a hard taskmaster.

There came a point when the Israelites cried out for freedom from this servitude and God heard them. Moses and Aaron were appointed by God to approach Pharaoh with the call, 'Let My people go' (Exodus 5-10). There was very little hope of this happening at first. However, sent by God, several plagues were inflicted upon the land of Egypt, increasing in their severity. Pharaoh was at times so affected by them that he agreed to let the people go. But when the plague was removed, his heart was hardened and he refused to let them go free.

Eventually, when all had failed, the most severe judgement of all fell on the Egyptians. The firstborn in all the land of Egypt was to be killed. The firstborn of Pharaoh, of the servants, and of the beasts. It was to happen at midnight. Instructions were given to the Israelites as to how to deal with this last plague. They were involved in this as much as the Egyptians. It was to be a new beginning in their national history. They were to take a lamb out of their flocks and kill it and take of the blood and put it on the two side posts and on the lintel of the door of their houses.

It was very important that this was done! God said: 'When I see the blood, I will pass over you' (Exodus 12:13). Death did not enter the houses of the Israelites because they were covered by the blood. Pharaoh was now very glad to let them go. They were set free from their bondage at last! What a remarkable picture it is of redemption by blood.

This may help us to understand how it was that God was able to say (we repeat the words again): 'He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, nor has He seen wickedness in Israel'. Let us just think of ourselves in our day. The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesian believers: 'In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace' (Ephesians 1:7). Can you put yourself into this verse?

The brazen serpent

In Numbers 21, the chapter just before the chapter recording the plot hatched between Balak and Balaam, Israel passed through an experience which is another picture of the cross of Christ. We usually refer to it as the 'Brazen Serpent'. Our interest in this incident is increased because of the conversation recorded in John chapter 3 between the Lord Jesus and Nicodemus. Let us listen to the Lord's words on that occasion: 'And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:14-15).

We are not left in any doubt as to the meaning of Israel's experience at that time. It happened because of the complaints of the people. God in His care for them had fed them for forty years with manna. Never was there a day when there was no food. There was no manna, of course, on the sabbath day, but they were given double rations on the day before to last over the sabbath. This is what they said: 'For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread' (Numbers 21:5).

They were an ungrateful people! God was angry with them and sent fiery serpents among them that bit them and many of them died. When the people confessed their sin, Moses prayed that God would take away the serpents. Although they were totally undeserving, immediately the remedy was found. What a God they had! He was full of mercy and compassion.

We in our day should be thankful that God is unchanged. Listen to the New Testament: 'But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)' (Ephesians 2:4-5). The remedy lay in the serpent set upon a pole. All who looked lived! The serpent on the pole was a replica of that which had caused such havoc in the camp. The Israelites could not understand, as we do, the real meaning of this. Let us be thankful then that we can see, in this incident, the cross.

It is in the letter of Paul to the Romans where we read of justification. The subject is brought to its conclusion in chapter 8. We notice that it was a serpent to which the people who were bitten must look in order to live. It was the fiery serpents which brought death. Chapter 8 of Romans begins like this: 'There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus'. How can this possibly be? Paul goes on to write: 'God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh'. What a wonderful deliverance! Who would have thought of this? Later on in this same chapter a question is asked: 'Who is he who condemns?' There is no one, because we have an Advocate: 'It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God' (Romans 8:34).

Maybe we can understand in this picture form how Balaam could not curse the people of God. They were covered by the blood, they had looked at the serpent lifted up. We must remember, however, that these pictures were merely shadows. Christians have the substance and are cleansed by the precious blood of Christ and we are justified and outside any fear of accusation.

God with us

This second blessing continues further: 'The LORD his God is with him' (Numbers 23:21). They were a favoured nation. It was not long after they left Egypt, that God said: 'Let them make Me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them' (Exodus 25:8). It was left to the people to provide the materials for this dwelling place. They were to be willing hearted in their giving. This was the tabernacle. Most of us have possibly heard about this. It was a very interesting building. The structure was of boards of acacia wood, and draped over the boards were four curtains. The inner curtain was actually called the tabernacle and the other three were coverings.

Inside this building was an area known as the Holiest of All. No one was allowed to go in there except the High Priest, and that only once a year. There was some furniture inside: there was the ark, the mercy seat and on each end of the mercy seat were cherubim of gold. In between these two cherubim God dwelt. His presence was indicated by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God guided His people in all their movements across the wilderness.

It was always God's intention to dwell with men, and it still is. The Church is God's dwelling place today. These are the words of the apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians: 'In whom you also are being built together for a habitation of God in the Spirit' (Ephesians 2:22). This dwelling place of God was formed on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given.

So all Christians have part in the house of God. We must get away from thinking of the Church as bricks and mortar. The apostle Peter says: 'You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Peter 2:5). Worship is the privilege that belongs to all those who make up this house.

There is also a manner of life that is suitable to the house of God. Psalm 93:5 says: 'Holiness adorns Your house, O LORD, forever'. The same message comes through in the New Testament. In Paul's first letter to his son in the faith, Timothy, there is a call for godliness. On one occasion Paul writes of 'the doctrine which is according to godliness' (1 Timothy 6:3). Whatever teaching there would be, godliness must be the end product.

Royal priests

The next expression in this second blessing is: 'And the shout of a King is among them' (Numbers 23:21). Let us think about this! There might be a future bearing here. In the last section we thought of believers as a holy priesthood, offering up spiritual sacrifices to God. However, this refers to 'the shout of a King'. This is royal, no doubt.

In First Peter where we are said to be a holy priesthood, we are also called a royal priesthood. What do they do? Here it is: 'That you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light' (1 Peter 2:9). Here we have another privilege! It is also a witness going out to others, telling of all that God has done for us.

The blessing then goes back to Israel's redemption. 'God brought them out of Egypt' (Numbers 23:22). They were never to forget that memorable day! Reading through the Old Testament we find this. The prophets were constantly reminding the people of Israel of it.

Even in the New Testament it comes up. In the book of Acts we have the account of the defence of Stephen to those who were baying for his life. You may remember that he did lose his life at the end of his defence. He reminds his Jewish audience of their rescue out of Egypt: 'He brought them out, after He had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt' (Acts 7:36).

Do you remember when you first trusted the Lord Jesus for salvation? You came under the shelter of the blood! It was a new beginning! Israel's end is that they will overcome all their enemies: he has strength like a wild ox, or buffalo (Numbers 23:22). The Christian's end is also sure.

A generous God

In verse 23 of our chapter, Balaam concludes: 'For there is no sorcery against Jacob, nor is there any divination against Israel'. The plot had failed. But notice the question which is now raised: 'What has God done?' (Numbers 23:23). Every happiness marked out for mankind had its source in God's heart.

When the Lord Jesus talked with the woman of Samaria, He referred to God as the giving God. Nothing is ever held back. He gave His Son! He gives eternal life! He gives the Holy Spirit! Think again of Romans 8: 'If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?' (Romans 8:31-32).

As we bring this chapter to a close now it is remarkable to see that Balak still preferred to plod on in his wicked intentions. He was getting desperate by now. 'Neither curse them at all, nor bless them at all', he told Balaam (Numbers 23:25). So they decided to go to another place.

In our next chapter we will see what becomes of this. Balaam knew very well what the result would be. Maybe he still hoped for a reward. Let us remember the leading point in this second blessing! Israel was a justified people. So are we today: 'Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus' (Romans 3:24). May we all be a rejoicing people as well!

3. Numbers 24:3-9

Order and unity

All the efforts of men to bring about some order in our world seem to have very little success. No matter what approach is tried, confusion rather than order is often the end result. Look at Northern Ireland. Order and unity go together, but they are very difficult to obtain. The same picture emerges in the professing Church; we see disorder. Certainly, there is no practical unity. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the letter of Church order, gives us help on this subject. The writer tells us: 'God is not the author of confusion but of peace' (1 Corinthians 14:33). There is something very attractive where order and unity are seen together.

In this third of Balaam's oracles, which we are going to think about now, these two attractive features are seen. You can read the passage in Numbers chapter 24:3-9. In the first of these blessings, Israel was seen as God's sanctified people. In the

second oracle, which we thought about in the previous chapter, Israel was seen as God's justified people. In the third oracle, it is the order seen in the nation of Israel.

This time Balak took Balaam to another location from which he was able to see the whole camp. It was probably a fair distance away. It must have been quite a sight. Balaam was impressed by the orderly way the camp was set out. There were about two million persons in the camp, staggering isn't it? The whole arrangement was divinely ordered. Man had no part in it, therefore all was perfect.

The Spirit of God came upon him

On this occasion Balaam did not go to evil spirits for help. We are told that he 'raised his eyes, and saw Israel encamped to their tribes; and the Spirit of God came upon him' (Numbers 24:2). It may come as a surprise to us that the Spirit of God came upon him. We are accustomed to the New Testament teaching about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers. This is permanent now because of the work of redemption being complete. But in Old Testament times, it was often the case that the Holy Spirit came upon people for a short time, even on men like Balaam. For the time being he was under the control of the Spirit of God.

Balaam also referred to himself as 'the man whose eyes are opened' (Numbers 24:3). He was to see things as God saw them, whether he wanted to or not. He had no other option. Let us go on further. He again referred to himself and said: 'The utterance of him who hears the words of God' (Numbers 24:4). He had a tremendous privilege had he been able to appreciate it. Let us think of ourselves as Christians for a while. The Spirit of God came upon Balaam, his eyes were open and he heard the words of God – three advantages which we possess. However, we are responsible to take advantage of them and make use of them. Because we have the Holy Spirit our eyes have been opened, but we must desire the understanding of the truth.

The writer of that wonderful Psalm 119 prayed: 'Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law' (Psalm 119:18). Whoever the writer of this psalm was, he did not have the blessing which we have, but the longing was there. It would be a good thing if we had the same earnestness. And what about the third of these advantages? He hears the words of God. We, too, need the words of God for our instruction in right living, and for spiritual growth.

The God of infinite resources

We will return to the narrative again. Every word of this oracle is so full of meaning and contains some lesson for us. For the first time in these oracles another of the

names of God appears. Balaam saw 'the vision of the Almighty' (Numbers 24:4). This was the way God made Himself known to Abram, saying to him: 'I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless' (Genesis 17:1).

Abram was ninety-nine years old at the time. Nearly twenty-five years before this, God had promised him a seed. No family had materialized from his marriage to Sarai thus far. As the years passed by the situation became humanly impossible. Human efforts were made to gain a seed but they ended in disaster. Nevertheless Abram maintained his faith in God's promise; we read in the New Testament of Abram that 'he did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God' (Romans 4:20). Eventually, when Abram was about 100 years old and Sarai was 90 years old, Isaac was born.

We are told that the meaning of 'the Almighty God' is 'the God of infinite resources'. This God was on the side of His own people Israel and Balaam was still set on cursing them! This God is ours today. The real Isaac has come, speaking of the risen Christ. We can rejoice that 'all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us' (2 Corinthians 1:20).

The order of the camp

There was something very attractive about the camp of Israel. The tents were evidently set out in a perfect order and none were out of place. As you read the passage, you gain the impression of rows of tents all evenly placed. They could not camp where they liked, God ordered the arrangement for their benefit. When you consider the thousands of people involved, there had to be a highly disciplined order. All was set in relation to the centre, which was the tabernacle where God dwelt.

In the early chapters of the book of Numbers we learn about this order. There were, as we know, twelve tribes all named after the sons of Jacob, making up the nation of Israel. The twelve tribes were numbered according to the men of war in each tribe. There was no tribe called after Joseph. He was represented by his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. The tribe of Levi was separated to serve; they were workers. There was also a family who were priests who acted for God in matters of approach to God.

The twelve tribes, 'all who were able to go to war' (Numbers 1:3), were on different sides of the camp. There were four camps, each one comprising three tribes. One was on the east side toward the rising of the sun. Another on the south side, another on the west side and another on the north side. Their positions were far

off from the tabernacle. They were for the protection of the whole camp. Where God had put them, there they must stay.

Levi had three sons, Kohath, Gershon and Merari. The families of these men occupied positions on the north, south and west of the tabernacle. Their work was concerned with the tabernacle, therefore they camped close by. Each family had a particular work to do. The family of Kohath had the charge of the furniture of the tabernacle. They were responsible for carrying the items upon their shoulders. The family of Gershon had responsibility for the curtains and the coverings. They carried the hangings of the court and of the gate when the camp moved on. The family of Merari carried the boards of the tabernacle and the bars, also the pillars around the court and their sockets and pins and cords. It was also their work to set up the tabernacle when they moved to a new site. They were to dismantle it when they had notice to move on. Each had his own work to do. They were not to covet the work of another. Someone who had to carry the pins [tent-pegs], should not be envious of the Kohathites who carried the furniture of pure gold.

There is a lesson for us here. We have already referred to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The subject is Church order. He addressed them as 'the Church of God which is at Corinth' (1 Corinthians 1:2). Therefore it was to a local Church. There was much which needed putting right. As well as points of teaching, there were also matters of practical Christian living.

In the first chapter we learn that man's wisdom has no place as we consider the cross of Christ. The second chapter tells of the Holy Spirit as the only power for revealing the things of God. In the following chapters many areas of practical living are considered. In chapter 11 there is the proper conduct to be observed when they gathered together to keep the Lord's Supper; all very important to us in our times. In chapter 12 the Corinthian Christians are all said to be members of one body. He writes: 'But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased' (1 Corinthians 12:18). Also we are told that each member of the body was given gifts to use for the building up of the whole. So every believer has a part to play!

Do you remember what we said about the Levites and their service in the tabernacle? They were not to be envious of one another. If one of the family of Merari refused to carry the tent peg, how insecure the building would be. God had given him that job to do, that's what counted! Let us go back to First Corinthians again and listen: 'If the foot should say, Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body, is it therefore not of the body?' Every gift given by God is needful. Paul also

goes on to say, 'And the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you; nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you' (1 Corinthians 12:15-16, 21).

One of the problems today is that in many places everything is in the hands of one man. Some believer who has a gift is not able to use it. This was never intended! Let us ask ourselves if we are fulfilling the function that God has given us to carry out. We must not forget chapter 13 of First Corinthians. I can almost hear someone thinking to themselves, that's the chapter about love. You are absolutely right! How vital this is! It has been described as the lubrication necessary for the smooth running of the body. We all know that in a mechanism, if the oil is not supplied, there will be a breakdown. Let us listen to one or two verses from this chapter: 'Love suffers long and is kind... does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil' (1 Corinthians 13:4-5). 'Bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things' (1 Corinthians 13:7). I think you will agree how necessary this is.

Four descriptions of the camp

Let us think now about the four descriptions of the camp given in Numbers chapter 24:6. The first of these is: 'Like valleys that stretch out'. A valley is very attractive, usually running between hills on each side. When the sun is shining and the various shades of green present themselves, it makes a very beautiful picture. However, nothing is said about water, it is the valley itself we are to notice.

When John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Lord Jesus, appeared, he had some very searching things to say to the Jews. He called for reality. In Luke's gospel he quotes from the book of Isaiah. It goes like this: 'Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low' (Luke 3:5 quoting from Isaiah 40:4). He had in mind, not a physical picture, but a practical lesson. These were words of encouragement to all to take a low place now. Those who exalt themselves now, will be brought low in the day of judgement. The Bible is full of this sentiment. The Lord Jesus 'humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name' (Philippians 2:8-9). Paul says to us all: 'Let this mind be in you'. The lesson from the valley is humility.

Second description of the camp

The next description given in verse 6 is: 'Like gardens by the riverside'. A garden is a cultivated area; it is not meant to run wild. Some put a lot of hard work into their gardens, others are a little lazy and get very despondent. However, a well kept garden can be very attractive, particularly if full of colourful flowers. There are

gardeners who prefer a vegetable garden because it serves a more practical purpose.

The garden in our verse is situated by the riverside, which is a great advantage because it will be well watered. There is a verse in Isaiah 58 which refers to God's people as a watered garden. This verse is not thinking of material fruit, but fruit of a spiritual kind. The water speaks of the Holy Spirit. In the New Testament we read of the fruit of the Spirit. There is great variety of these fruits, all a likeness of Christ. It should be our ambition as believers to produce fruit in our lives. The Lord Jesus told the disciples the secret of fruit bearing: 'He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing' (John 15:5). The second lesson for us in this verse is fruitfulness.

Third description of the camp

The third description in verse 6 is: 'Like aloes planted by the LORD'. These Scriptures that make reference to aloes all suggest fragrance. One of these is Psalm 45. The king who is described thus: 'All Your garments are scented with myrrh and aloes and cassia, out of the ivory palaces, by which they have made You glad' (Psalm 45:8).

Although they possess fragrance, both myrrh and aloes are bitter to taste. We think of myrrh in connection with suffering. How often we hear of Christians called to pass through sore trials, yet a fragrance is present with them because they accepted the trial as from the Lord.

It says in our verse too: '...planted by the LORD'. There is part of a verse of a hymn, which says: 'A Father's hand will never cause His child a needless tear'. The lesson for us is submission to the Lord's will.

Fourth description of the camp

The fourth of these descriptions is: 'Like cedars beside the waters'. The cedar tree is very tall and stately. When Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, most of the trees used were cedars from Lebanon. They seemed to be more suitable for the magnificent house being built as God's dwelling place.

Although we have been thinking of our submission to the Lord's will, at the same time, there is a dignity which God has put upon us. No credit to us, it is all of His grace. The apostle Paul, in his letters, tells us of our relationship as the sons of God.

These cedar trees are beside the waters. We have already thought of water as the vitality given by the Holy Spirit for fruit bearing. This time, however the Holy Spirit

is to help us enjoy the relationship we possess: 'And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, Abba, Father' (Galatians 4:6). We should be ever thankful for what we owe to grace.

Sharing the blessings

As we near the close of this blessing, in verse 7, there was a concern that others should share in what Israel had received. Listen to this verse: 'He shall pour water from his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters'. Water out of our buckets is the blessing we have received and long to share with others. The many waters point to this world in its need. The seed is the life giving Word of God that men are in need of.

Balaam again reminded Balak of Israel's past and future blessings. Balak was very angry with Balaam. He was told to go without any honour! Let us pray that we may practise the lessons we have learnt from this passage.

4. Numbers 24:15-24

A people blessed by the Lord

As we start the fourth oracle, we remember from our last chapter that there were frayed tempers and hard words spoken. Balak, the king of Moab, felt badly let down by Balaam the prophet in whom he had put such trust. He said to Balaam: 'I called you to curse my enemies, and look, you have bountifully blessed them these three times' (Numbers 24:10). The conspiracy had gone badly wrong!

As we have seen in the first three chapters, the people Balaam had been asked to curse were God's people. Balaam had to admit that he had no control over what he had said. God was not going to allow a curse to be put upon the nation whom He had blessed. Please remember the messages of these blessings:

- (1) Israel is God's sanctified people;
- (2) They are His justified people;
- (3) They are an orderly and united people.

A look at the future

Balaam was sent back to his place in disgrace without any reward. However, he wasn't going without having the last word. This is how he puts it: 'And now, indeed,

I am going to my people. Come, I will advise you what this people [Israel] will do to your people [Moab] in the latter days' (Numbers 24:14).

This information is given in the fourth oracle. It is quite obvious that this oracle was not scheduled. It was supplementary, but gives us much teaching with regard to the future. Many centuries have passed since these oracles were written, yet the prophetic contents have still to be fulfilled. Christians have always been very interested in this area of Bible teaching. This can be helpful so long as we do not become too occupied with the events. None of these things will take place until the Lord Jesus has come to take the Church to heaven. As believers, we should be looking for Him.

You may recall the parable told by the Lord Jesus about the wise and foolish virgins who were waiting for the coming of the bridegroom. They all fell asleep. At midnight there was a cry. In the NKJV it says: 'Behold the bridegroom is coming' (Matthew 25:6). In the original it just says: 'Behold the bridegroom'. It is the Person who is coming that should attract our hearts. We love Him because He first loved us. Let's be looking for Him!

A time of trouble

The latter days of this fourth oracle consider times on earth just prior to the coming of the Lord Jesus to reign. There is a time of trouble to fall upon the earth of such a kind that has never been known before. All men will be affected by it. However, the main brunt of it will be felt by the nation of Israel.

The Old Testament Scriptures describe it as a time of trouble. Listen to the prophet Daniel: 'And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time' (Daniel 12:1). The godly ones will be delivered out of these terrible times. Blessing will come to the whole nation of Israel when they own their guilt in the crucifixion of its rightful King. This gives the setting of the events described in Balaam's oracle.

God the Most High

In the blessing we considered in the previous chapter, we came across a name of God we had not met with before. It was 'the Almighty'. We have it again in this fourth oracle, but also, another name of God occurs which we have not come across before. It is 'the Most High'.

It is found in other parts of the Old Testament, usually in connection with the closing days. Its first mention in the Bible is in Genesis 14. This is a very interesting Scripture and concerns a certain king whose name was Melchizedek. What is more,

he is said to be 'the priest of God Most High' (Genesis 14:18; Hebrews 7:1). The Most High God is the 'Possessor of heaven and earth' (Genesis 14:19, 22).

Looking around today we see men asserting themselves, just as though everything belonged to them. God is hardly recognized and owned in His own creation. It will not always be like that! We have already thought of the Great Tribulation, bringing sorrow on the earth. When that day has run its course, there will appear the Kingdom of the Son of Man, when God will not stand any interference in His running of things, whether in heaven or on earth.

The story behind the appearance of Melchizedek is very telling. He lived at the same time as Abraham. There had been a war between certain kings and Lot, who was the nephew of Abraham, got mixed up in it and was taken prisoner. However, Lot was rescued by his uncle (Genesis 14). In the New Testament, Melchizedek is mentioned on a number of occasions in the letter to the Hebrews (Heb. 5,6,7). His name means 'King of righteousness'. He was also the King of Salem, which means 'King of peace.'

He is a character of some importance because the writer says: 'Consider how great this man was'. His greatness is because he is a picture of the Lord Jesus as the true King. His Kingdom will be righteous and the result will be peace. When He comes to reign He will bless His victorious people Israel, just as he blessed Abraham when he had rescued Lot out of captivity. So, arising out of this first mention of the 'Most High God' we have an incident which helps us to understand the bearing of this final blessing.

All shall see Him

The next verse is very solemn (verse 17). Balaam had no real prospect in view. There was one thing he does seem sure about, which everyone should be assured of. Listen to his words: 'I shall see him, but not now; I shall behold him, but not near' (Numbers 24:17).

It is in the New Testament that we learn: 'Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him' (Revelation 1:7). It is the Lord Jesus whom every eye shall see! Even unbelievers will see Him, but it will be as Judge.

Balaam had no hope. He had lived for himself and sold himself to the Devil. Of course, there were men of faith in the Old Testament whose hopes were brighter than Balaam's. Just think of Job and listen to what he said! Speaking of the God he knew so well he says: 'Whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another' (Job 19:27). Job's word's ring with a sure and certain hope. The apostle

John conveys the same certainty to Christians today. In his first letter he writes about the Lord's appearing, saying: 'But we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is' (1 John 3:2).

Coming back to Balaam he could only say: 'I shall behold Him, but not near'. Let us make sure that, for ourselves, we are really believers in the Lord Jesus so that our prospect is sure.

The Star and Scepter

The next part of our oracle concerns the Star and the Scepter. These two ideas are found in different parts of the Bible. There are New Testament Scriptures which deal with each. We do not know how much Balaam really understood, but he makes a striking statement: 'A Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel' (Numbers 24:17).

In the other Scriptures mentioned, the word scepter may not be used, but the idea behind it is there. The star is for watchers. We must be up early in the morning if we wish to see the early star. The scepter speaks of authority and rule. Some of you may remember the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. During the solemn ceremony she held in her right hand the scepter. This represented the responsibility of rule.

We find the first mention of the star in the New Testament in the early chapters of the Gospel of Matthew. It was when the wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem. It was not actually at the exact time of the birth of Christ, but a little while after. They must have been watchers! They came with the request: 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him' (Matthew 2:2).

How did these Gentiles find this out? Did they have access to the Jewish Scriptures? There were many, we believe, in those faraway times who grew tired of the idolatry they were surrounded with. These men were earnest seekers for light and one night, as they looked into the heavens, they saw a star that held their gaze. They said, 'This is it!' and they made their long journey to Jerusalem.

There is a lesson for us all from this. It is a long time since these men lived, but God is still the same. Whenever there is genuine seeking for light, God will help us. We have an advantage in our day; we have all the Scriptures. But in spite of that, we often find difficulties. It may be even something relating to our circumstances. Pray about it. God is faithful!

Think again of the words of these wise men: 'We have seen His star in the East'. They were able to grasp the link between the Star and the Scepter. They asked:

'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews'? Most of us know how all of this aroused the jealousy of king Herod. Instead of rejoicing, we read that all Jerusalem was troubled. Herod devised his wicked scheme to kill the young Child. God overruled for His own glory. The wise men were able to bring their gifts and worship to the King.

The next occasion where the picture of the Star and Scepter appears is in the Apostle Peter's second letter. It concerns the mount of transfiguration. Peter was there and was greatly impressed by what he saw. We will think of the Scepter first. In the first chapter he writes: 'But we were eyewitnesses of His Majesty' (2 Peter 1:16). The word has a royal ring about it. As Peter recalled that night upon the mount, he thought of all the wonderful Old Testament Scriptures about the coming Kingdom of the Lord Jesus. He was quite sure that all would be fulfilled.

But now he writes: 'We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts' (2 Peter 1:19). The scene witnessed by Peter on the holy mount was a preview of the coming Kingdom. If there were any doubts in the mind of Peter and those with him, they were removed then. And so he writes: '...the prophetic word is made more sure'. This is another translation of the verse just quoted. The day dawn is the day of the Kingdom. The morning star arises in our hearts; it is the Christian's hope. It is a guarantee of the day of glory. So we have the Scepter and the Star together again.

One more Scripture may be sufficient. It is in Revelation chapter 22 verse 16: 'I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning star'. In the first part of the verse, the Lord Jesus is King in David's line. He has every right to the Scepter. He is the Offspring of David as born in Bethlehem. As the Root of David He is God, from whom David sprang. In the second part of the verse He is the Morning Star. This is the way Christians know Him. We are to be watchers, looking for the Star of the morning, who will come at any moment. He says: 'Behold, I am coming quickly' (Revelation 22:7).

The end time

The last few verses of our chapter take us back to the Great Tribulation again. There is an amazing amount of detail given. Many different nations are mentioned, some of which have been lost in history. Nations that have set themselves against God down through the past ages will be represented there. The institutions which men thought to be stable and secure will be brought down.

In Matthew 24 we have a description of these end times: 'And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened' (24:22). Just compare this verse with Numbers chapter 24 verse 23: 'Alas! Who shall live when God does this?' It is clearly the same period of time. Following on from these terrible days, Christ will appear and set up His Kingdom, and peace will be the result. The message from this fourth oracle presents to us a people with a sure and certain hope.

Jacob and Israel

In each of the four oracles we have seen that the nation, which Balaam had been hired to curse, is addressed as both Jacob and Israel. The first oracle put it plainly. Balak's commission to Balaam was: 'Come, curse Jacob for me, and come, denounce Israel!' (Numbers 23:7).

Jacob, in the first place, was Abraham's grandson. As time went on, the name Jacob became attached to the whole nation. There is a marked resemblance between Jacob's history and that of the nation. All the promises made to Abraham would be inherited by Jacob. Just think of the trouble Jacob would have avoided if he had waited on God's time. But that wasn't Jacob!

He deceived his nearly blind father, Isaac, by taking the blessing that rightly belonged to Esau, his brother. He had to flee from the wrath of Esau. For over twenty years he was an exile in the home of Laban, his mother's brother. Laban was just as shrewd as Jacob. He was a hard taskmaster and Jacob worked hard for very small wages. Rachel was one of Laban's two daughters and Jacob loved her. A bargain was struck; he was to work for seven years for Rachel. When the years were completed, through Laban's trickery, it was not Rachel he had worked for, it was her sister Leah. This cost Jacob another seven years labour for the daughter he loved.

The troubles endured by Jacob over the whole of his life were many. At Peniel he was renamed Israel; this was repeated again at Bethel. All the way through God was dealing with His servant (Genesis 27-37). At the end of his ways, he has to speak of God as 'the God who has fed me all my life long to this day' (Genesis 48:15). However, in the New Testament we learn of his greatest triumph: 'He worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff' (Hebrews 11:21).

There are many lessons we can learn from God's dealings with Jacob. In the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12, the writer refers to chastening. Maybe we are a little wary of this subject. The word really means 'child training'. We must not despise the chastening of the Lord nor faint when we are reproved by Him. Listen carefully

to verse 11: 'Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it'. On one occasion at the end of Jacob's life, he almost reached the end of his tether. Just listen: 'All these things are against me' (Genesis 42:36). Have you ever felt like that? We can not really say that, can we? God assures us: 'All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose' (Romans 8:28).

We have already pointed out the similarity between Jacob's personal life and Israel's national history. Think of their centuries of exile. Ever since the captivity in Babylon in 588 BC they have never been free. Some of us can remember the setting up of the State of Israel in 1948. However, it is a very fragile situation at the moment. But soon all will be fulfilled; their exile will be over forever. May these chapters from these obscure oracles be an encouragement to us in our day.

