

God's Plans
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Num. 22:22-35

Opening: *"The Lord works in mysterious ways."* That is not in the Bible, but the idea comes from an old hymn.ⁱ What does it mean? What kinds of circumstances would cause us to say it?

Sometimes God works out His purposes in such an unusual way, we look back and say, *"I didn't see that coming."* God worked everything out for my good and His glory, but He did it in a way I could never have imagined. A famous example of that in scripture is found in Numbers chapter 22. Here we find a paranoid king, a greedy soothsayer, a talking donkey, and God using each of them to accomplish His purposes for His people.

The point: God can use any means He chooses to accomplish His will. A Christ-follower's job is to watch for how He is working and trust Him to work things out even when the circumstances don't make sense.

Here is some context. The people of Israel traveled to the plains of Moab. Moab's King Balak became afraid of their large numbers and past victories. Wanting to protect his people, Balak sent messengers to a man named Balaam who was known as a "seer" or "soothsayer" to offer him money to curse the Israelites.

Balaam is a complicated character. He was not an Israelite prophet, yet he turned to the One true God for guidance on Balak's request. God told Balaam not to go with the messengers or curse Israel. Balaam refused Balak's request and sent the messengers away. So far, so good, but Balaam's blind spot was greed!

Balak offered bigger rewards. Balaam again consulted God, who this time (surprisingly) said Balaam could go with them, but to only do what God instructed him to do. So, Balaam prepared to leave with the Moabite officials, with God's warning not to say anything except what God commanded.

Numbers 22:21–35 (NLT) — **21** So the next morning Balaam got up, saddled his donkey, and started off with the Moabite officials. **22** But God was angry that Balaam was going, so he sent the angel of the Lord to stand in the road to block his way. As Balaam and two servants were riding along,

- God said go, now God was angry. Is this a contradiction? Scripture doesn't reveal what changed but Balaam did or thought something to cause God's anger.
- God has two kinds of will: His DIRECTIVE will and His PERMISSIVE will.
 - Directive will: God's clear commands in Scripture that believers must obey.
 - Permissive will: God's allowance of human choices, even imperfect ones, that He uses for His purposes and testing (Romans 8:28).ⁱⁱ

- God's DIRECTIVE will was plain: Don't curse Israel. His PERMISSIVE will: *"I'll let you go and I will see if you obey my commands and only say what I command."*
- Verse 22:19 implies that Balaam, in his GREED, was looking for a "work around".
- Lesson: "When we already know what God's will is, it is wrong to go back to see "what else" He may say."ⁱⁱⁱ (*The Bible Reader's Companion*)

23 Balaam's donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand. The donkey bolted off the road into a field, but Balaam beat it and turned it back onto the road. **24** Then the angel of the Lord stood at a place where the road narrowed between two vineyard walls. **25** When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it tried to squeeze by and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall. So Balaam beat the donkey again. **26** Then the angel of the Lord moved farther down the road and stood in a place too narrow for the donkey to get by at all. **27** This time when the donkey saw the angel, it lay down under Balaam. In a fit of rage Balaam beat the animal again with his staff. **28** Then the Lord gave the donkey the ability to speak. "What have I done to you that deserves your beating me three times?" it asked Balaam. **29** "You have made me look like a fool!" Balaam shouted. "If I had a sword with me, I would kill you!" **30** "But I am the same donkey you have ridden all your life," the donkey answered. "Have I ever done anything like this before?" "No," Balaam admitted. **31** Then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the roadway with a drawn sword in his hand. Balaam bowed his head and fell face down on the ground before him. **32** "Why did you beat your donkey those three times?" the angel of the Lord demanded. "Look, I have come to block your way because you are stubbornly resisting me. **33** Three times the donkey saw me and shied away; otherwise, I would certainly have killed you by now and spared the donkey." **34** Then Balaam confessed to the angel of the Lord, "I have sinned. I didn't realize you were standing in the road to block my way. I will return home if you are against my going." **35** But the angel of the Lord told Balaam, "Go with these men, but say only what I tell you to say." So Balaam went on with Balak's officials.

- Obvious question: Why wasn't Balaam surprised that his donkey was talking? Speculation: Balaam may have dabbled in the occult so human-like voices coming from an animal might not have shocked him. Pure speculation.
- Verse 34: Balaam confessed: *"I have sinned"* but it feels more like *"Since I got caught, I'm sorry."* If we were facing God's angel with a sword we would start confessing too! He did NOT confess his GREEDY motives.
- Was Balaam a "good guy" or a "bad guy?" A bad guy, but it's complicated.
- He sought guidance from the One true God and proclaimed what God said. However, though Balaam never directly cursed Israel, he helped Balak by advising a strategy to cause Israel to sin through idolatry and sexual immorality with Moabite women. This led Israel into sin bringing God's anger and a deadly plague upon them (Numbers 25:1-9; Numbers 31:16; Revelation 2:14).
- The New Testament tells us Balaam put greed and corruption ahead of true obedience to God. (2 Peter 2:15, Jude 1:11, Revelation 2:14) Balaam was bad.

So, What's the Takeaway?

- What can we learn from this passage?
- God works in mysterious ways like using a talking donkey! You could teach this in the children's department! If we were teaching elementary school kids, we might share these lessons: *"If something isn't working the way you wish, instead of getting angry, remember Balaam's story. Take a deep breath, look for what you might not see, and try to listen for God's voice or advice—even if it comes from somewhere unexpected. God wants to protect us and guide us, if we let Him!"*^{iv}
- A pretty good lesson for all ages! What are other lessons from this passage?
- First, what does it say about your spiritual blindness if a donkey perceives God's presence more than you do? God has a sense of humor, but the point isn't a joke. Pride, greed, or self-focus can blind a person to God's guidance.
- Remember what we said about God's DIRECTIVE and PERMISSIVE wills?
- Warren Wiersbe: *"The main lesson here is to find the will of God and obey it, regardless of personal desires or subsequent circumstances."*^v
- Larry Richards: *"Don't let your prayers deteriorate into asking God for permission to do something you already know is not His will."*^{vi}
- Finally, as we said at the beginning, God can use any means He chooses to accomplish His will. A Christ-follower's job is to watch for how He is working and trust Him to work things out even when the circumstances don't make sense.
- When obstacles arise, instead of reacting with anger or frustration (as Balaam did), it is wise to pause and consider if God is using unusual circumstances to get our attention or reveal a blind spot causing us to miss His greater purposes.

ⁱ While not found in the Bible, it originates from William Cowper's 1773 hymn, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way"

ⁱⁱ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Balaam-God-change-mind.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Richards, L. O. (1991). *The Bible reader's companion* (electronic ed., p. 106). Victor Books.

^{iv} <https://www.teachusthebible.com/Lesson.php?Lesson=a-talking-donkey>

^v Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament* (Nu 22). Victor Books.

^{vi} Richards, L. O. (1991). *The Bible reader's companion* (electronic ed., p. 106). Victor Books.