

Truth for Today

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The Parables of Balaam: Numbers 24:3-9

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 that, "*God is not the author of confusion*", 1 Corinthians 14:33. There is something very attractive where order and unity are seen together.

In this third of Balaam's parables, which we are going to think about today, these two attractive features are seen. You can read the parable in Numbers 24:1-9. In the first of the parables, Israel was seen as God's sanctified people. In the second parable, which we thought about last week, Israel was seen as God's justified people. Today 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 "*lifted up his eyes, and he saw Israel abiding in his tents according 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 refers to himself as "*the man whose eyes are open*" (Numbers 24:3). He was to see things as God saw them, whether he wanted to or not. He had no other option. Let's go on further. He again refers to himself and says, "*He hath said, which heard the words of God...*" (Numbers 24:4). He had a tremendous privilege had he been able to appreciate it.

Let's 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, Psalm 119 prayed, "*Open Thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law*" (Psalm 119:18). Whoever the writer of this psalm was, he hadn't the blessing that we have, but the longing was there. It would be a good thing if we had the same earnestness. What about the third of these advantages? "*He ... heard the words of God*" (Numbers 24:4). We, too, need the words of God for our instruction in right living, and for spiritual growth.

The God of infinite resource

We will return to the narrative again (Numbers 24:3-9). Every word of this parable is so full of meaning and contains some lesson for us. For the first time in these parables 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 the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect*" (Genesis 17:1). Abram was 99 years old at the time. Nearly 25 years before this, God had promised him a seed (Genesis 12:7). No family had materialised 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 staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong 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 (Genesis 21:1-7). We are told that the meaning of 'the Almighty God' is 'the God of infinite resource'. 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 in Him, "*all the promises of God in Him are yea, and in Him Amen, unto the glory of God by us*" (2 Corinthians 1:20).

Order

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 Numbers 24:3-9, 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 (Numbers 1-4). 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 is no tribe called after Joseph. He is represented by his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (Numbers 1:32-34). The tribe of Levi was separated to serve; they were workers (Numbers 3:5-51). There was also a family who were priests who acted for God in matters of approach to God (Numbers 3:1-4).

The twelve tribes, *“all that were able to go forth to war”* (Numbers 1:45), 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 (Numbers 4:1-20). They were responsible for carrying the items upon their shoulders. The family of Gershon had responsibility for the curtains and the coverings (Numbers 4:21-28). 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 (Numbers 4:29-33). 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] were not to 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 addresses it, *“Unto 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 1 Corinthians 1 we learn that man's wisdom has no place as we consider the cross of Christ. 1 Corinthians 2 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 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 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 1 Corinthians 12 the Corinthian Christians are all said to be members of one body (1 Corinthians 12:12). He writes, *“But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him”* (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 (1 Corinthians 12:7). 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's go back to 1 Corinthians again and listen: *“If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?”* (1 Corinthians 12:15) Every gift given by God is needful. Paul also goes on to say, *“And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you”* (1 Corinthians 12:21). 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's ask ourselves if we are fulfilling the function that God has given us to carry out.

We must not forget 1 Corinthians 13. 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's listen to one or two verses from this chapter, *“Love suffereth long, and is kind ... seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil”* (1 Corinthians 13:4-5). *“Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things”* (1 Corinthians 13:7). I think you will agree how necessary this is.

As the valleys are they spread forth

Let's think now about the four descriptions of the camp given in Numbers 24:6. The first of these is, *“As the valleys are they spread forth”*. 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, 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 unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name”* (Philippians 2:8-9). Paul says to us all, *“Let this mind be in you...”* (Philippians 2:5). The lesson from the valley is **humility**.

As gardens by the river’s side

The next description given in Numbers 24:6 is, *“as gardens by the river’s side”*. 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 Numbers 24:6 is situated by the river side 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 (Isaiah 58:11). 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 (Galatians 5:22-23). There is great variety of this fruit, 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 that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing”* (John 5:5). The second lesson for us in Numbers 24:6 is **fruitfulness**.

Trees of lign aloes which the LORD hath planted

The third description in Numbers 24:6 is, *“trees of lign aloes which the LORD hath planted”*. These scriptures that make reference to aloes all suggest fragrance. One of these is Psalm 45:8. The king who is described thus, *“All thy garments smell of myrrh, and aloes, and cassia, out of the ivory palaces, whereby they have made thee glad”*. 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 Numbers 24:6, *“which the LORD has planted”*. There is part of a verse of a hymn, which says, *“A Father’s hand will never cause His child a needless tear”* (WF Lloyd). The lesson for us is **submission to the Lord’s will**.

As cedar trees beside the waters

The fourth of these descriptions is, *“As cedar trees beside the waters”* (Numbers 24:6). The cedar tree is very tall and stately. When Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 5-8), 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 ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, 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 parable, in Numbers 24:7, there was a concern that others should share in what Israel had received. Listen to this Numbers 24:7! *“He shall pour the water out of 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 reminds Balak of Israel’s past and future blessings. Balak was very angry with Balaam. He was told to go without any honour!! (Numbers 24:10-11) Let us pray that we may practise the lessons we have learnt from this parable.

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