

“10-4, Good Buddy”

[Numbers 22:1-20](#)

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If you were with us last week, then you heard the story of God condemning the Israelites to 40 additional years in the wilderness. They had only been there 15 months, so 40 years was going to be quite a long time. That was at the end of chapter 14 and 15, and then the next four chapters cover 38 of those next 40 years. In the broad scheme of the Bible, that's still pretty quick, but considering it took 70 chapters to cover those first 15 months of the journey, 38 years in four chapters is nothing.

But the truth is that it was a fairly uneventful 38 years. Right in the middle of that time, there had been a brief rebellion of the people, and God helped the leaders of the Israelites to put it down; but other than that, the Israelites were just living their lives in the wilderness, waiting for God to decide that they were ready to go and take the land that He had promised them.

If you'll remember, the reason that God decided to make them wait another 40 years was that when the first 12 spies came back from the land, 10 of them said they wouldn't be able to conquer the land. That got the people all worked up, and they said “it would be better for us to die in the desert, or even go back to Egypt.” So, basically, God said, “if that's what you want, then fine. All the adults who left Egypt will die in the wilderness, and your children will take the land.”

The main point was that if they didn't have enough faith to believe that God would lead them to victory, then they obviously were not prepared to finish their journey. But another point was that in order for them to fully trust God, it was clear that they needed to stop saying, “Oh, it was better for us back when we were slaves in Egypt.” The easy solution to that problem was to wait until there was nobody left who remembered Egypt. If they waited another 40 years in the wilderness, then there wouldn't be anyone there to say, “remember how great it was back in Egypt?” Instead, they would be saying, “why are we hanging out here in the wilderness when God has promised this better place to us?”

In fact, at the start of chapter 20, instead of saying, “Why didn't we just die in Egypt, where we had leeks, garlic, fish...all for free!” they actually said, “It would be better for us to die in battle, where there are figs, grapes, and pomegranates!” After this, it was time to get moving, and they did. The king of a nearby people attacked the Israelites, and when he did, instead of whining to Moses about going back to Egypt, the people prayed to God to enable them to take the land. So they set out to the east of the Promised Land and conquered two nations on their way. That leads us to today's chapter, when Israel is

on the cusp of attacking the nation of Moab.

The passage that Ina just read for you is the start of three chapters that involve a man named Balaam. Now, Balaam was an interesting character. He lived far to the north and east of the Promised Land, on the Euphrates River. Nevertheless, he was known throughout the region as a powerful prophet. So, when Balak, the leader of the nation of Moab saw the Israelites camped on his borders, he sent some of his officers to ask Balaam for help...and he also sent quite a bit of money to him. So, Balaam was not only a prophet; he was also one of the first independent government contractors. He was the founder of BCG: the Balaam Consulting Group.

I love what the elders of Moab and the adjacent kingdom of Midian said to each other here: “Israel is going to lick us up like an ox licks up the grass of the field.” That’s a powerful image. Back when the Israelites were afraid to go and conquer these people, the spies had said, “oh, we looked like grasshoppers to those people;” but now it was those people saying, “the Israelites are like oxen who will lick us up like grass.” Moreover, if you’ve ever watched cattle eat grass, then this is a powerful image. Eating grass is what they do. They don’t think about it, and it’s tough to move them out of the way. When they’re eating, they just gradually move forward, head down, devouring whatever happens to be in front of them. So, things didn’t look good for Moab and Midian.

So when the elders of Moab and Midian came to Balaam, Balaam was intrigued, and he told them, “let me sleep on it.” In the night, God came to Balaam and said, “Who are these men with you?” Balaam told Him, and then Balaam said, “can you put a curse on those Israelites for me?”

But God said, “No; don’t put a curse on them, for they are blessed.” So, Balaam got up the next morning and told the folks, “Nope; can’t do it.” So those elders went back to Balak and told them what had happened. I love verse 15 here: “Then Balak sent other officials, more numerous and more distinguished than the first.” Instead of middle managers, he sent the board of directors on a retreat. But again, Balaam said to them, “Look, I can only do what God tells me to do.” But that night, God said, “ok, go with them, but only listen to me.”

Now, I won’t go into great detail about the rest of Balaam’s story, but if you remember his name from Sunday school classes or your own reading, you probably remember him for another reason. Does anyone recall what that was?

Right: the talking donkey!

²¹Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the Moabite officials.²²But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the Lord stood

in the road to oppose him. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, it turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat it to get it back on the road.

²⁴ Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path, with walls on both sides. ²⁵ When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. So he beat the donkey again.

²⁶ Then the angel of the Lord moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. ²⁷ When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, it lay down under Balaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. ²⁸ Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"

²⁹ Balaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If only I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now."

³⁰ The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?"

"No," he said.

³¹ Then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown.

³² The angel of the Lord asked him, "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me. ³³ The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared it."

³⁴ Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, "I have sinned. I did not realize you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now if you are displeased, I will go back."

³⁵ The angel of the Lord said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you." So Balaam went with Balak's officials.

³⁶ When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at the Moabite town on the Arnon border, at the edge of his territory. ³⁷ Balak said to Balaam, "Did I not send you an urgent summons? Why didn't you come to me? Am I really not able to reward you?"

³⁸ "Well, I have come to you now," Balaam replied. "But I can't say whatever I please. I must speak only what God puts in my mouth."

³⁹ Then Balaam went with Balak to Kiriath Huzoth. ⁴⁰ Balak sacrificed cattle and sheep, and gave some to Balaam and the officials who were with him. ⁴¹ The next morning Balak took Balaam up to Bamoth Baal, and from there he could see the outskirts of the Israelite camp. ([Numbers 22:21-41](#), abridged)

So even though God was empowering Balaam, He still felt the need to keep Balaam in check. In fact, God felt the need to keep reminding Balaam of who was in charge. So, when Balaam spent the next days giving prophecies to Balak, all of those prophecies went against Balak and other surrounding nations. Balak was obviously not happy, but Balaam simply said his piece and went home.

But while the story of Balaam is interesting in itself, what is even more interesting is that Balaam was there in the first place. The ancestors of the Israelites had once lived in that region of the world, but they had been gone for about 450 years! They went down to Egypt during a famine, eventually became slaves, and then emerged centuries later in the wilderness. How in the world was there someone way up in Syria who was a prophet of the same God?

The people of Israel were only just now becoming reacquainted with God, and God even had to remind them who He was (the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). God had also told them, "You are my people." Yet God had also decided to work through Balaam. Now, this whole passage presents Balaam as being kind of goofy, but that's not the point. The point was that God had prepared someone ahead of time to help the Israelites.

Another interesting matter is that the people of Moab and Midian were seeking help from Balaam in the first place. Didn't they have their own various gods? Well, apparently their own gods weren't good enough for them. So on the one hand, we have someone whom God had appointed to be a prophet a long way from where the Israelites were, and on the other hand, we have a people who were looking for some kind of God who would help them.

Of course, at the time, it was God's mission to allow the Israelites to conquer them. But that was then. Now, we have been given a different understanding of how God is at work because we know that God has revealed Himself not as a militant conqueror, but as a servant savior: Jesus. Moreover, He has not only conquered armies; He has conquered death, by dying on the cross and being resurrected.

And after his resurrection, Jesus said to his followers: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20) Notice that he did not say to make warriors; he said to make disciples. Warriors work in ways that make the news, but disciples often work in more subtle ways because the Holy Spirit often works in more subtle ways.

When things look bleak for the church in our world, we need to remember this, especially today, on Communion Sunday, when the church is growing and thriving in so many other places around the world. They need our prayers amidst growth and persecution, and we need theirs as we risk dying and shrinking away from our own culture.

In fact, one of my favorite quotes on the global church came from a man named Lesslie Newbigin, who was a missionary in India during the middle of the last century. He said this: "It is only by being faithful participants in a supranational, multicultural family of

churches that we can find the resources to be at the same time faithful sustainers and cherishers of our respective cultures and also faithful critics of them.” By being engaged with the world, we know when we are capitulating to our own culture, and we know when we are doing the work of Christ that will bring vitality.

This is important to remember remember when God puts people in our way, and puts us in other people’s way, for His service. Some may be on the more *visible* front lines of that service, but the reality is that we are all on the front lines of that service. This week, go into your lives considering how god is placing you and others, in your life and around the world, for His work.