

The Faithfulness of God Seen in His Ways With Balaam

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon explores God's unwavering faithfulness to His people as demonstrated through the story of Balaam and the challenges posed by the enemy.

Scripture: Numbers 23:19, Deuteronomy 8:2, Zechariah 3:4

Topics: "Trust in God's Grace", "God's Faithfulness"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the faithfulness of God as seen in His dealings with Balaam and Israel, illustrating how the enemy seeks to hinder God's people from entering the promised land. Despite Israel's rebellion and shortcomings, God remains committed to His promises, demonstrating that His grace prevails over human failure. The sermon highlights the importance of faith in recognizing God's unwavering support and the futility of the enemy's attempts to curse what God has blessed. Darby reassures believers that God's judgment is based on their standing in Christ, not their failures, and encourages them to trust in God's mercy and grace.

Transcript

It was the object of the enemy to hinder God's people from the enjoyment of the land God had promised to bring them into. It was not now a question of getting out of Egypt. They were brought out, and nearly at the end of the way. Could they be prevented entering into the land? If it depended on what they were, of course they could be; and Satan, the accuser of the brethren, could hinder our getting to heaven because of our sins, if it were on the ground of our worthiness that we must go there. Israel had been stiff-necked and rebellious all the way along, though God had been bringing them water out of the rock for their thirst, and manna from heaven for their food; and now the solemn question has to be settled, whether they are to be prevented entering on account of it, It is the power of the enemy here exerted, not his wiles; they come after, in the history of Balaam. But this was the point, whether, by force or by wiles, the enemy could keep Israel out of Canaan, We shall see how God announces His thoughts about the people; and then the enemy was utterly powerless when He took up the question.

Moab is in the place of this world's power - at his ease from his youth - settled on his lees - not emptied from vessel to vessel (Jer. 48:11). Besides being in the place of the world, the prophet is called with the reward of divination in his hand to act for Moab. Balak had civil authority, but he was conscious that he

needed in this case a superior power to help him. The "powers that be are ordained of God." Therefore there is really no need of this kind of power to gain men's minds when all is right. But Balak, having no sense of God's authority and power, seeks it from another. The Israelites are pitched just on the border of the land when this attempt is made to prevent their entering. This is very practical for us, because many, knowing redemption, and feeling their inconsistencies and failures, begin to doubt whether after all they can reach heaven. It is right to judge ourselves for what is evil in us, but the heart owes it to Christ to trust in the mercy of God to the end.

294 When the people had crossed the Red Sea, they sung in the confidence of the power of God to bring them right through, "Thou hast guided us by thy strength to thy holy habitation." Moab and all their enemies were nothing to them then; for they were conscious of the power of God for them, though the wilderness was all before them, They knew they had got safely out of Egypt, and they took all the rest for granted; but they did not know themselves. Therefore God led them forty years in the wilderness, to humble and to prove them, and to know what was in their heart (Deut. 8). In the next chapter we see it was also to shew what the goodness of God to them in all this discipline was.

The people are now at the edge of the land near Jericho. Is the promise as available now that they were at Jordan as at the Red Sea? This was the question as regarded the people as a whole, not individually; and it is all a type of spiritual things to us. Faith takes us thoroughly beyond circumstances. It does not close the eye, running blindfolded to heaven, but taking God's judgment about sin, it knows God's grace also about salvation, and can see that the trials in the way are for the purpose of humbling us, proving us, and doing us good in our latter end. Faith never slights God's judgment about our sin, but trusts in God's grace in spite of it. God will never accuse, though He will chasten His people; nor will He let Satan do it.

Moab really had no need to be afraid, for Israel had strict injunctions not to touch them. Israel would even buy their water of them as they passed through their land. But Moab had no faith in what God said. Satan, with all his cunning, cannot tell what the simplest faith knows - the power of God's grace to save to the end. Moab is just a sample of the entire and total ignorance of God's thoughts in the world. It is well to remember this. They would see this mysterious influence, and yet they are not wholly ignorant of it, but opposed to it. What had God said to Abram? "I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee." And now Balak goes about to take the very means of getting God's curse upon himself. Such is the utter blindness of the flesh; it always takes the road to turn God's judgment on itself. There was not only sin in Balak, and plenty of that too, but he had entirely closed his eye against all God's thoughts. It is a terrible thing to be out of the way of God's light, and that is the case with the poor world. If the outward moral restraints are removed in the haunts of men, when their passions are let loose, what utter degradation and misery we see! And where there is not this outward wretchedness, how sad to see a person walking through this world without God! Respectable he may be, and well thought of by his fellow-creatures; but how can he get through death and judgment without God? It is dreadful to think of the ignorance that is in them because of the blindness of their hearts. If God judges according to our works, what is to be done with them? God says, "There is none righteous, no not one." "All the world are become guilty before God." Men go on their own way, and think they will get through well at the end. Men of the world are just doing what Balak did. They are looking for blessing where God has sent the curse, and the curse where God has sent the blessing. There is as much sense about God's ways in an ass as in a man walking without Him.

295 There are two things in Balaam's mind. One is, that he is afraid of God Himself. So the world are frightened at what they see wrought amongst God's people, whilst they cannot perceive the motives that

are at work and they have no power to control them. There is no power in a parent to prevent the conversion of his child all in a moment. The world cannot control God's work. See how God takes Balaam up; but has he any time to go to God? (v. 20, etc.).

God is always for His people in His own heart, Israel were entirely ignorant of what was going on, but God was not. He has taken up the cause of His people, because of the love in His own heart; and therefore, though He warns them and chastens them, yet He will not let Satan have anything to do with them. It is a sign of Balak being a very wicked man, that he tried to get God's word to Balaam reversed.

In Zechariah 3 we have the same thing. Satan there tries to get God's sentence pronounced against the high priest. What could Joshua say for himself? But God says, "I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee." He does not say I do not mind the filthy garments, but He comes in of His own love and grace as regards Israel. I have clothed thee with change of raiment. God had said to Balaam, "Thou shalt not go." Thou shalt not curse this people. That ought to have silenced him. He ought to have said, There is an end of it, if God says No. But he was as perverse as he could be.

296 What a terrible plague the people of God are to the world! They are, in one sense, a pest to it, if walking faithfully. If they are killed, they only multiply the more; there is no getting rid of them, nor doing anything with them. There are principles and motives and ways in the children of God that the world cannot get rid of. Balaam says to Balak, "If thou wouldest give me thine house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord." How pious he is become now! If he might have gone, he would. But though he cannot do what he would for Balak, he still keeps up his credit as a prophet of the Lord. just as if he had the secret of the Lord, he says, "I will know what God the Lord will say unto me more," v. 19. There has been the money offered, but Balaam speaks as if he was connected with God. This is the way men often act. They claim a connection with God, but disclaim connection with God's people. But this will not do. It is in connection with His people that the cross comes in, and that is the test for a man.

Now God lets Balaam go, and he is delighted at it; but God chose him to go now. And his way was as perverse as ever. God intended him to go, that he might pronounce a blessing upon His people, instead of a curse. Morally, as regarded himself, Balaam's was the most wicked act in going; and yet God brings out all His purposes through it. He is nothing more than a rod in God's hand. He goes, and the Lord by an angel meets him. He rebukes man's ways and man's wisdom, by putting more sense into the mouth of the brute beast than man has; for though he has a mind, he uses it against God, which a brute beast cannot do. Man, in one sense, is more blind than Satan, because Satan believes and trembles. God could reveal Himself to a beast's eye as well as to a man's, when He pleased. The effect of this on Balaam was that, in his passion, he would have killed the ass (v. 29), if he could. When the Lord opens his eyes to see his madness and blindness all the way he has been going, he feels he has sinned, and that God has stopped him (v. 34); but it was from mere terror that he thus speaks, and he goes on without seeing that instead of cursing the people, he was to bless them, etc. (v. 39). Balaam goes to the idols of Balak to sacrifice. He liked the name of religion; but his heart was not with God at all, it was set on money and honour in this world. What a picture of the impotency of sin!

297 Mark from this history the way God takes to deal with His people. Man thinks to thwart God's people of the blessing He has for them, and Satan tries to defeat God in His purposes of love. But in going their own way, He suffers men to do the very things that are for the accomplishment of these purposes. This we see in the crucifixion of Christ. The Jews said, "not on the feast day," etc.; but Christ, our Passover, was to be sacrificed for us. It was at that very season when the feast was to be kept, and yet they meant nothing

less. What a comfort it is to know that God thinks of us, and arranges all for us, though we fail to think of Him! There is not a day, not a moment, but God is thinking of us, and He is above all the plottings of Satan. He will take care of His people. Do they want food? He sends them manna. Guidance? there is the pillar going before them. Do they come to Jordan? there is the ark there. Have they enemies in the land? there is Joshua to overcome for them. He deals with them in the way of discipline when they need it, as He did with Jacob. He humbled him, but gave him the blessing in the end. What a thought this ought to give us of the love of God, when we thus see His activity in goodness to us all the way through! What comfort to know He is for us, out of the spring and principle of His own love! He brings His grace and righteousness together in the putting away of sin on the cross. We can never really know God till we know He is love. God so loved the world that He sent His Son. The world did not ask God to send, and they did not ask Christ to come, but God loved them, and He sent Him. What a comfort, I say again, to know God is for us, seeing all the enemies - our own hearts, the world, and Satan! Faith gets through all, by looking at what God is.

Numbers 23

We have seen how God laid hold of Balaam by exposing his wickedness. Having got him in His own hand, He forces him to have to do with Himself about His own people. It is a remarkable fact that Israel does not appear at all in this scene. It was God and Balaam. So when God beholds His people, He does not allow any check against them, because they are His. If God was walking amongst His people, He took account of all their perverseness; see Deut. 9:24, which speaks of them as at this very time rebelling against the Lord in the plains of Moab. God's judgment of us as saints in our walk is the same thing; and our sins against Him, after we are saints, should grieve us even more than those we felt as sinners. When God judges amongst His people as to their walk, He calls everything to account, for He can "by no means clear the guilty." Never does He, in the riches of His grace, bear with or allow sin, as people say. He can cover it in atonement; He can put it away in the cross, instead of imputing it; but never can He bear with it, and so give up any requirements of His holiness.

298 However, the whole question now was between God and His enemy, and it took place up at the top of the hill, the people knowing nothing at all about it. What could Balaam do with God about the people? Nothing; and when he found he could not avail with God against them, he afterwards seduces them into sin, and God has to chasten them.

But now, in having to do with God about His people, it is only the occasion of God's making a new revelation of His grace. God could not curse His people, or defy Israel; and so Balaam has to say after him. God has His own thoughts about them, and although He can allow no inconsistency in His people, He will bring to pass His own purposes. "And God met Balaam: and he said unto him, I have prepared seven altars, and I have offered upon every altar a bullock and a ram. And Jehovah put a word in Balaam's mouth, and said, Return unto Balak, and thus thou shalt speak. And he returned unto him, and, lo, he stood by his burnt sacrifice, he, and all the princes of Moab. And he took up his parable, and said, Balak the king of Moab hath brought me from Aram, out of the mountains of the east, saying, Come, curse me Jacob, and come, defy Israel. How shall I curse whom God hath not cursed? or how shall I defy whom Jehovah hath not defied? For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him: lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations. Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his."

It is of the last importance for us to see how distinct is God's judgment concerning us as in our standing in Christ, and as to our walk as saints in the world. The judgment we form of ourselves is never the same as God's. The Holy Spirit, who leads us to judge ourselves, takes account of all the evil which is contrary to God's holiness. In judging myself I ought to be able to see in myself all the evil, and to be ready to say, when I detect myself, This is not charity, that is not holiness. I have to judge my own heart according to what I am; but God's judgment of me is according to what He sees me in Christ. If I did not know this to be God's judgment of me, I should never have courage to judge myself. How could I ever look at the evil within, if I knew God was going to impute to me all the evil, and would condemn me for it? All the difference between experience and faith is this. The testimony of the Holy Ghost in Hebrews 10, as to what God says of us, has to be laid hold of by faith their sins and iniquities will I remember no more."

299 Balaam has no faith in God, so he goes to a high place to see what He will say to - him. Peradventure the Lord will meet him. In the next chapter we find he did not do this. Here he takes the character of being very religious, as we see. With God on the hill, not Israel in the camp, he sees them. The people, as to fact, were going on with their foolishness, or their piety (there were Joshuas and Calebs, no doubt); but that is not taken account of: God takes all this interest in them out of the springs of His own heart. "The people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations."

God is as absolute in taking them for Himself as in taking them out of the world. So we are "bought with a price," and are therefore not our own. Taken out of condemnation, sin, and misery, we are brought into blessing' and now we are not to be like those who are in the world. We are redeemed from the world, and the result of this principle is, that we do not belong to ourselves at all. What we do belong to ourselves in is in the first Adam. But God has taken us out of this world, that we should belong to Himself. He brought His people out of Egypt to be made His own habitation (Ex. 15-18). God dwells on earth now in us as His habitation. We shall dwell in heaven by-and-by. We are a heavenly people, and the life of a person consistent with God's dwelling in him is looked for.

It is Satan's unwearied effort to bring a curse against us just because we are redeemed, as it was with God's enemy, in the history of His people, to curse them. We have to resist him steadfast in the faith. His accusations are made to God, and God answers for us. Faith takes up the answer of God, as in Zechariah 3. It is of the greatest importance for our peace, and our holiness too, for us to understand this. What could Joshua say to the filthy garments about which he was charged? and ought we to have our filthy garments? Surely not; he has nothing to say, but God answers for him: This is a brand I have plucked out of the fire, and you want to put it in again. Then He says to the angel, "Take away the filthy garments," etc., and then God speaks to Joshua, and tells him that He has done it. "Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee," etc. Thus He makes the poor sinner to know the perfectness of His work, and the love in His heart that has wrought on his behalf. He does not say, I will do it, but "I have caused," etc.

300 Verse 19. Balaam is obliged to bear witness to the character of God. "God is not a man that he should lie, neither the Son of man that he should repent," etc. He is not only a God of truth, but He does not alter it. He says, "Their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more." This speaks the unrepentingness of God. The truth that He tells is truth, eternal truth, and it is now in the mouth of the enemy. "I cannot reverse it." Not, I will not, but I cannot.

The great need we have, as individual saints in the wilderness, is to see the evil that is in ourselves practically, and judge it perfectly. Then we shall never be judged for it, God cannot allow sin in us. His way of putting it away is the opposite of making allowance for it; but it is the non-imputation of it.

Verse 23. "Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, . . . according to this time it shall be said, what hath God wrought? " If a soul only sees what he has wrought, he stays away from God; but if he sees what God has wrought, he is happy with Him. You can never know how to pronounce judgment upon yourself, without getting into His presence. It must be all uncertainty until you know what God says, You will have Jesus on one side, and hopes on the other - light on one hand, and clouds on the other. It is in knowing our position in the last Adam, as risen before God, that we have peace, and joy, and confidence.

301 Numbers 24.

The attempt of the enemy did not cause God to reiterate the same blessing merely, but drew out His activity, as it were, to bring out all the riches of His blessings. He carries out His own purposes according to His own will and thoughts. We have seen, firstly, how God claimed them as His own people; secondly, that they were completely justified by God. "He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel." God met Balaam, and he found there was no possibility of succeeding against God. Instead, therefore, of going, as at other times, to seek for enchantments, he turns his face to the wilderness.

Verse 2. "Balaam lifted up his eyes, and saw Israel abiding in their tents," etc. We do not see a picture of the saints here in heavenly glory, for it was not Israel as brought into the final blessing of God in the land, that they are regarded here, but Israel in the wilderness. Thus we get through Balaam the knowledge of God's thoughts about His people here below (v. 3-5). Directly I look at that which is born of God, I find an entirely new order of things. We are not in the flesh but in the Spirit. The Christian is justified in Christ, and, besides that, he is born of the Spirit. Balaam looks upon the people with God's eye. The Spirit of God fills his mind, and he sees what God's thoughts are about His people. Faith enables us to see with God's eyes instead of our own. "How goodly are thy tents," etc. "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin, . . . and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" - not it cannot, but "he cannot." "He," the whole man is of God.

Balaam "saw Israel abiding in their tents." It was the wilderness. It is not now the justification of His people, but their beauty and loveliness in God's sight, as in the Spirit. They are not only accepted judicially, but they walk in the Spirit. Of Abel it is said, "he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts," etc. He was accepted in person first, and then his gifts are well pleasing to God. So Enoch was not only justified, but he had the present enjoyment of favour. "Before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God." He was, as it were, walking in the joy of the Father's smile.

Verse 5. "How goodly are thy tents," etc. This illustrates the aspect of the church of God now, through the Spirit (Eph. 2:22). It is more than man was in paradise. There was then no dwelling nor tabernacle of God. By-and-by His tabernacle will be with men. But as being in the standing of the church, we are taken, as it were, into God's paradise now. We are builded together for a habitation of God through the Spirit. If the church is divided and scattered, it is held in God's hand. "The wolf, coming, catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep"; but again it is said, "none shall pluck (or catch, it is the same word) them out of my hand."

302 We are God's dwelling, and that is a different thing from God's regenerating us merely. The fact of being regenerate does not reveal things to our soul; but God does reveal things to us by His Spirit which dwelleth in us.

The manifested beauty of spiritual life in an individual, or in the church, is another thing, and depends, of course, on the faithfulness of walk; but the maintenance of spiritual life is entirely on God's part, and never

fails.

"As the valleys are they spread forth." This is the refreshing power of the gospel. "How goodly are thy tents," They are in favour with all the people; and the secret of the loveliness of the aspect was, that they were watered by the river of God - as gardens by the river's side,"

It is impossible but that Christ must meet the need of faith, let the general unbelief be what it may, Often, it is true, though most humbling, that the individual faith shines the brightest when the general unbelief is the darkest. In Paul's case it was so; he went on in spite of all difficulties, when "all were seeking their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's." Faith looks not only at the blessing there is in God, but at the blessing where He has given it - with His people. The people are identified with God on high, therefore they are blessed, and God cannot allow evil in them,

Faith recognizes the place where blessing is, and drinks it in. "As the trees of lign-aloes which Jehovah hath planted," etc., and then they become the source of blessing to others when so filled. "He shall pour the water out of his buckets," v. 22. The bride herself says to her Lord, "Come," and says to those who are athirst also, let them "take the water of life freely."

I have not got CHRIST yet, but I have got the living water, and therefore I can say, Come and drink, We are not in glory yet, and we are not with the world; but we have the Spirit, and it is said, "He that believeth, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water."

303 Having Christ, we have sap from the tree of life, and there can be no limit in the result. There is no stint, though little power indeed to use it. "His seed shall be in many waters," signifying the extent of the blessing.

Then, besides this, there is strength. "His king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted." Israel will have a king in Zion, but we are in a closer connection with the Bridegroom as His bride. We shall be displayed in the kingdom by-and-by. Mark the difference, how it is said, "How goodly are thy tents," etc., but thy "king shall," etc. The people had not a king yet. Their visible blessing in power had not come yet. Their elevation was to be a future thing in the land.

With us it is not the kingdom we are looking for as our hope; indeed, in a certain sense, we are now in the kingdom. It is for us "the kingdom and patience"; for Christ is rejected and gone. We are being called to share His rejection, and afterwards His glory. "We shall reign with him." He is a King, and we are kings. He is a Priest, and we are priests. If we suffer with Him, we shall be also glorified together. He is our Head, and in all things He is to have the preeminence. There is to be power connected with those who have the kingdom. There is not only such a thing as blessing, but it is connected with the people of God.

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