

Numbers 22:21-38

Does God Contradict Himself?

21 And Balaam arose in the morning and saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. 22 And God's anger burned against him because he went, and the angel of the LORD stood in the road as an adversary against him. Now he was riding his donkey, and his two young servants were with him.

At first glance, these verses present us with a problem. In the previous verse, God told Balaam, “Rise, go with them; but only the word that I speak to you—that you shall do.” Then Balaam gets up, saddles his donkey, and goes with the princes of Moab. Immediately, however, we are told that God's anger burns against him because he went. Wait a minute. God tells Balaam to go, Balaam goes, and then God becomes angry because Balaam went? Does God contradict Himself? If we read the passage quickly, it can certainly sound that way. But I think the tension is intentional. We need to pay attention to exactly what God said. God did not simply say, “Go.” His permission came with an important qualification: “But only the word that I speak to you—that you shall do.” Balaam is permitted to go, but he is not permitted to pursue his own agenda. His journey must remain completely subordinate to the word of God.

That makes verse 21 interesting. Balaam gets up, saddles his donkey, and goes, but there is no mention of God's word. We are not told that Balaam reminds the princes, “I can come with you, but I remain completely bound by whatever Yahweh⁽¹⁾ tells me.” He simply gets up and goes. And Balaam already knows something important: God has blessed Israel. Yet another delegation comes, Balaam asks again, and as soon as he receives permission to travel, he is on his way. The problem, therefore, may not simply be that Balaam went. The problem is why Balaam wanted to go and what he still hoped might happen when he arrived. Outwardly, Balaam can say, “God told me I could go.” Inwardly, however, his desires may still be moving toward something God has already forbidden. There is a difference between God's permission and God's approval.

That helps us understand verse 22: “God's anger burned against him because he went.” The Hebrew imagery behind anger is vivid—the flaring or burning of the “nose.” Something about Balaam's going provokes God's anger. Then the angel of Yahweh⁽¹⁾ stands in the road *lāšāṭān lō*⁽²⁾—“as an adversary against him.” The Hebrew *śāṭān* here means an adversary or opponent. Balaam is moving forward, but God has placed an adversary directly in his path. And that leaves us with an uncomfortable question. There is a tremendous difference between asking, “Am I technically allowed to do this?” and asking, “Is my heart actually submitted to God in doing this?” Balaam seems very interested in the first question. God is about to expose the second.

The Eyesight of a Donkey

23 And the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with his drawn sword in his hand. And the donkey turned aside from the road and went into the field, and Balaam struck the donkey to turn her back onto the road. 24 And the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on this side and a wall on that side. 25 And the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, and she pressed herself against the wall and pressed

Balaam's foot against the wall, and he struck her again. 26 And the angel of the LORD went further and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn to the right or to the left. 27 And when the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down beneath Balaam. And Balaam's anger burned, and he struck the donkey with his staff.

Now the irony becomes almost impossible to miss: the donkey sees what Balaam cannot see. Balaam is the famous seer. He is the man who has been summoned because of his supposed spiritual abilities, yet the animal underneath him possesses clearer vision than he does. Three times the narrator emphasizes that the donkey sees the angel of the LORD. Balaam sees nothing. The donkey sees the angel. She sees the sword. She sees the danger. The great seer is blind.

The first time she sees the angel, she turns off the road and goes into a field. Balaam thinks she has lost her way, so he strikes her and forces her back. But notice the irony: Balaam thinks the donkey has lost her way when the donkey is the only one who can see what is in the way. Then something fascinating happens to the geography. The road gets narrower. At first, the donkey can escape into a field. Then the angel stands between two vineyard walls. There is less room, and the donkey presses against the wall and crushes Balaam's foot. Then the angel moves farther ahead and stands in a place so narrow that the narrator specifically tells us there is “no way to turn to the right or to the left.” First there is a field, then there are walls, and finally there is no escape. The farther Balaam goes, the narrower the road becomes.

Yet Balaam never stops to ask the obvious question: “Why is this happening?” This is his donkey. She has carried him faithfully. She does not normally behave this way. First she runs into a field. Then she crushes his foot. Finally, she simply lies down. At some point, Balaam should wonder whether the donkey is really the problem. But when we desperately want to go somewhere, anything preventing us from getting there can begin to look like the enemy.

That happens to us. Someone begins moving toward an addiction. Money starts disappearing. Trust begins eroding. A spouse raises concerns. The children notice something is wrong. But rather than questioning the path, the person becomes angry with everyone getting in the way. Or perhaps we become so consumed by work, success, social media, recognition, or even ministry that the people around us begin telling us something is wrong. Instead of listening, we become irritated with them. Sometimes the people we think are getting in our way are actually trying to keep us from destroying ourselves.

That is Balaam. The donkey sees danger; Balaam sees inconvenience. The donkey is trying to avoid destruction; Balaam keeps punishing her for preventing him from moving forward. Balaam is striking the very thing that is keeping him from walking into the sword. Finally, the donkey has nowhere left to go, so she lies down underneath him. Then we read that Balaam's anger burned. That should sound familiar. God is angry because Balaam is going; Balaam is angry because he cannot go. Their desires are moving in opposite directions. Balaam cannot see the angel, the sword, or what the donkey is doing for him. All he knows is, “I want to go, and something keeps getting in my way.” The donkey can see the danger. Balaam can see only the delay.

Arguments with Miracles Display a Stubbornness Toward the Divine

28 Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, “What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?” 29 And Balaam said to the donkey, “Because you have made a fool of me! If only there were a sword in my hand, for by now I would have killed you.” 30 And the donkey said to Balaam, “Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I ever been in the habit of doing this to you?” And he said, “No.”

This is one of my favorite passages in the Bible because it is genuinely funny. A grown man is arguing with a donkey. But what makes it especially funny is that Balaam does not miss a beat. The LORD opens the donkey's mouth, the donkey begins speaking in a human voice, and Balaam argues back. There is no, “Wait. Did my donkey just talk?” He is so angry that he simply continues the argument.

Imagine driving a car you have owned for years without any problems. Suddenly, the steering wheel takes over and pulls you off the road. You fight it back, but it happens again. Finally, the car stops altogether. You get out and kick the tire, and then your car says, “[...], why are you kicking me?” At that point, I think most of us would reconsider our travel plans! But Balaam doesn't. He argues with the [donkey]. That is how blinded he has become by his own anger and desire. Even the presence of a miracle does not immediately make him stop and reflect. Then Balaam says something wonderfully ironic: “If only there were a sword in my hand, I would kill you.” The reader knows something Balaam does not know. There already is a sword. Balaam just cannot see it. The angel is standing in the road holding the drawn sword while Balaam complains that he wishes he had one. Balaam thinks he should be the one administering judgment, completely unaware that he is the one standing under judgement.

Then the donkey does something remarkable. She simply asks Balaam to think. “Am I not your donkey? Have I ever been in the habit of doing this to you?” In other words, “Balaam, look at the evidence. You have known me for years. You have ridden me all your life. Have I ever acted like this?” Balaam gives one of the shortest and perhaps most important answers in the passage: “No.” He knows she is right. Something unprecedented is happening, but Balaam has been too angry and too committed to his destination to consider what it means.

That is where the humor becomes uncomfortable. We sometimes imagine that if God would simply give people enough evidence, everyone would believe. “If God would just show me a miracle, then I would follow Him.” But Scripture presents a much more complicated picture of the human heart. Evidence does not automatically produce surrender, and miracles do not automatically produce obedience. A person can encounter something extraordinary and still interpret it through a heart already determined to go in a particular direction.

I know someone who walked away from the faith and nearly destroyed his marriage. Then, through an extraordinary series of circumstances, the marriage was restored. He returned to church, and his life changed dramatically. It was beautiful to watch. Recently, however, I learned that he is considering walking away from the faith again, and my heart sank. My immediate thought was, “After everything you have experienced, do you need another miracle to convince you of the

goodness of God?” But that is Balaam. God has placed signs all around him. God has now even opened the mouth of his donkey, and Balaam still cannot see. That is the frightening power of a stubborn heart: sometimes we would rather argue with the miracle than reconsider the road we are determined to travel.

God Uncovers His Eyes

31 Then the LORD uncovered the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with his drawn sword in his hand. And he bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground.

Finally, something changes: “The LORD uncovered the eyes of Balaam.” Notice that Balaam does not figure this out for himself. The angel was already there. The sword was already there. The danger was already there. Balaam simply could not see it. God does not suddenly appear; God enables Balaam to see what was already there.

When Balaam finally sees, his posture completely changes. Until now, everything about Balaam has communicated, “Keep moving.” The donkey turns aside, and Balaam forces her back. She presses against the wall, and Balaam strikes her. She lies down, and Balaam strikes her again. But when God opens Balaam's eyes, Balaam finally stops. He bows down and falls with his face to the ground. There is a beautiful reversal here. The donkey had gone down beneath Balaam; now Balaam goes down before God. The man who could not be stopped is finally brought low. Then the angel asks, “Why have you struck your donkey these three times?” I love that God begins there. God speaks on behalf of this animal that cannot defend herself against Balaam's violence. The donkey matters to God. Dominion over creation is not permission for cruelty toward creation. And then God reveals something astonishing: “The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely by now I would have killed you and allowed her to live.”

In other words, “Balaam, the donkey you have been beating is the reason you are still alive.” Think about that. Every time Balaam struck her, he was striking the creature God was using to preserve him. Every detour he resented was an act of mercy. Every interruption that made him angry was keeping him from the sword. Sometimes we become angry about a closed door without knowing what was behind it. We resent the delay without knowing what the delay prevented. We become frustrated with the person confronting us without realizing that God may be using that person to keep us from destroying ourselves. Balaam thought, “This donkey keeps ruining my journey.” God reveals, “This donkey has been saving your life.” Sometimes we do not understand the mercy of God until God uncovers our eyes.

Balaam finally says, “I have sinned.” For the first time, he acknowledges that the problem is not the donkey. The problem is Balaam. He says, “I did not know that you were standing against me on the road. Now therefore, if it is evil in your eyes, I will turn back.” We should be careful about saying Balaam has now undergone some complete transformation because the rest of Scripture gives us reasons to be cautious about him. Nevertheless, in this moment he has been humbled. The man who desperately wanted to move forward finally says, “I will turn back.”

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“God speaks through donkeys to change the intention of human hearts” preached by Peter Anderson (*author*)
August 9, 2026, at First Congregational Church of Clinton, MA

Remarkably, the angel tells him, “Go with the men, but only the word that I speak to you shall you speak.” And there it is again. It is the same command. God has not changed. God has not contradicted Himself. The entire encounter has brought Balaam back to what God said at the beginning: **Go, but your mouth belongs to Me.**

Then Balaam finally arrives before Balak, and Balak says something revealing: “Why did you not come to me? Am I really not able to honor you?” There it is: honor. That was part of the temptation from the beginning. Balak has money, prestige, and political power. He can offer Balaam access, recognition, and reward. But Balaam has just been lying face-down in the road before the angel of the LORD. So Balaam answers, “Behold, I have come to you now. But am I really able to speak anything? The word that God puts in my mouth—that I shall speak.”

There it is. That is what God told him at the beginning, and that is what Balaam needed to learn. Balak may have the money. Balak may have the honor. Balak may have the political power. Balaam may have his own ambitions. But none of them controls the word of God.

And this is where we have to remember what this story is ultimately about. It is not ultimately about Balaam, and it is not ultimately about a talking donkey. **It is about God's people.** Balak has summoned Balaam because he wants Israel cursed. Yet here is what I find so beautiful about this story: Israel does not know any of this is happening. Israel does not see Balak. Israel does not see Balaam. Israel does not see the angel. Israel does not see the sword. Israel does not hear the donkey. Israel does not know about the money or the plan to curse them. **Israel does not even know that God is protecting them. But He is.**

While God's people are going about their lives, God is standing between them and the curse intended for them. Dear Christian, that is good news. It does not mean Christians will never suffer. Christians have been persecuted, churches have been destroyed, and believers have been killed. Jesus never promised His Church freedom from suffering. But He has promised something greater: the gates of hell will not prevail against His Church.

Kingdoms have risen and fallen. Empires that appeared invincible have disappeared. Rulers have tried to extinguish Christianity. Cultures have declared the Christian faith obsolete. And still the Church remains. Why? Not because Christians have always been powerful. Not because Christians have always been wise. Certainly not because the Church has always been faithful. **Because God is faithful.**

Balak has the money. Balaam has the reputation. The king has the political power. But none of them controls the word of God. And somewhere below them is Israel, completely unaware that any of this is happening. They do not see the danger. They do not see the sword. They do not see what God is doing. **But God sees them.**

Perhaps that is something some of us need to hear this morning. You may not see what God is doing. You may not understand the closed road. You may not understand the interruption. You may not understand why something you desperately wanted has been taken away. And you certainly cannot see every danger from which God has already preserved you. Balaam couldn't. Israel couldn't. But God could.

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The God who controlled the mouth of the prophet was the same God who protected the people that prophet had been hired to curse. And He is still sovereign over His people. Sometimes we do not see the providence of God until He uncovers our eyes. But whether we see it or not, God remains faithful. **We are protected by a loving and sovereign God.**

Scanner's Notes:

- (*) Due to font differences, this document's pagination & some special characters differ from the original hardcopy document.
- (1) Spelled as: “YHWH” in the original document.
- (2) The Optical Character Recognition software used to scan the original hardcopy document did not properly reproduce the original Hebrew transliterated text. Instead, it was manually re-entered. However, the Hebrew reference noted with superscript contained characters which had to be substituted with the closest equivalents, as exact matches to the originals were unavailable.