Lesson 16 “I Cannot Go Beyond the Word of the Lord”
(Numbers 22–24; 31:1–16)

Introduction

Read the following statements and think about the type of person who would make them:

- “If [the king] would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God” (Numbers 22:18).
- “All that the Lord speaketh, that I must do” (Numbers 23:26).
- “I cannot go beyond the commandment of the Lord, to do either good or bad of mine own mind; but what the Lord saith, that will I speak” (Numbers 24:13).

These statements might suggest that the person was obedient, faithful, and humble.

These statements were made by a man named Balaam, who professed strict obedience but in his heart desired earthly rewards and honors. This lesson shows the consequences of stubbornly insisting on our own will to fulfill such desires.

Balaam refuses Balak’s offer of rewards in exchange for cursing Israel.
(Numbers 22:1–21)

Numbers 22:5–7 – Because he was terrified by the approach of the Israelites, Balak, king of Moab, dispatched messengers to offer Balaam rewards if he would journey to Moab and curse Israel so that Balak could drive them out of the land.

Numbers 22:8–14 tells us that Balaam responded by refusing to go curse the Israelites because the Lord would not allow him to do so.

We are sometimes offered “rewards” to disobey God. Balaam was tempted by the promised rewards, but we should resolve that riches and the honors of men will not tempt us.

After Balaam refused to come to Moab, Balak sent a second group of men, more impressive than the first, to try to persuade him.

Numbers 22:15–19 – Obviously, Balaam was tempted by this second offer. Balak offered “very great honor”. Being tempted, Balaam wanted to petition the Lord to allow him to curse Israel.

Lesson Highlights

- Balaam refuses Balak’s offer of rewards in exchange for cursing Israel.
- The Lord shows the danger of Balaam’s stubborn insistence on his own will.
- Balaam refuses to curse Israel.
- The Israelites destroy the Midianites and slay Balaam.

A study of this lesson will encourage us to submit to God’s will without hesitation.

Next Week

#17 “Beware Lest Thou Forget” - Deuteronomy 6; 8; 11; 32
Lord again. Perhaps he was hoping that the Lord would change his mind and allow him to accept the rewards offered by Balak, but at this point, he said, “...I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God...” (22:18).

As Joseph Smith found out centuries later when he asked the Lord about the 116 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript, there are dangers in persistently seeking an exception to God’s directions. As we examine the things we petition the Lord to allow us to do, are we sometimes persistent in an unworthy cause?

Numbers 22:20-22 - The Lord gave permission for Balaam to go with Balak’s messengers if he so desired, but the Lord was angry with Balaam for going because he knew what was in Balaam’s heart.

2 Peter 2:15; Isaiah 29:13 – Here, we are told that Balaam “loved the wages of unrighteousness” and Isaiah reminds us that some, like Balaam, will draw near with their lips while their hearts are far away.

The Lord shows the danger of Balaam’s stubborn insistence on his own will. (Numbers 22:22-35)

Numbers 22:22-30 – On his way to Moab, Balaam tried three times to force his donkey forward while the donkey balked because of the angel who blocked the way. Demonstrating his stubbornness, Balaam wanted to force his own will on the donkey and the Lord. Just as the donkey saw the angel and Balaam did not, the Lord saw many things that Balaam refused to see.

If we examine some common situations in our day, we see modern parallels of both individuals and groups stubbornly trying to do what they want to do rather than submitting to God’s will or the righteous counsel of parents or leaders. As examples: 1. A child, unhappy with the answer from Mom goes to Dad seeking a different answer. 2. A member of the Church, unsatisfied with the counsel of a priesthood leader, seeks out another priesthood leader. 3. A member of the Church rationalizes that a commandment doesn’t apply to him or her as it does to other members.

Numbers 22:31-35 - The Lord chastened Balaam through the mouth of the ass and the angel. Balaam decided to return home, but the angel told him to continue, but to remember that he should only do as commanded by the Lord.

D&C 95:1 explains why God chastens his children—because he loves them, will forgive them with chastening, and will prepare a way out of the temptations. God’s chastening can be a blessing to us—if we accept it humbly, seeking forgiveness and direction on how to turn our lives around and become exacting in our obedience.

Balaam refuses to curse Israel. (Numbers 22:36-24:25)

After Balaam arrived in Moab, Balak asked him three times to curse Israel. Each time the Lord told Balaam to bless Israel, and Balaam obeyed.

Numbers 22:38; 23:8, 19-20; 24:1, 12-13 – Balaam continues to tell Balak that he must say what God commands and he will not go beyond that.

Numbers 22:41; 23:1-3, 13-15, 27-30 - Even though he had refused to curse Israel as Balak requested, weakness was still evident in Balaam as he followed Balak from place to place and listened to his requests even though he knew that they were wrong.

If we place ourselves in temptation’s path, we will be confronted with unrighteous suggestions from friends, acquaintances, or the media. Eventually, our resistance can be worn down and we can succumb to temptations that we otherwise would not have considered.

The Israelites destroy the Midianites and slay Balaam. (Numbers 31:1-16)

Numbers 31:1-3 – Moses sent forth warriors to destroy the Midianites because the Lord was angry with them for enticing the children of Israel to sin as recorded in Numbers 25:1-3. It was Balaam who had counseled the Midianites to tempt the children of Israel to participate in idol worship and sexual immorality.

Numbers 31:16 – Balaam’s counsel had caused the children of Israel to trespass against the Lord. Although Balaam obeyed the Lord to bless rather than curse Israel, in his heart he wanted earthly honors and tangible rewards. To receive his desired rewards, Balaam suggested tempting Israel to sin,
Conclusion

If Balaam had humbly submitted to God’s will, much sin and suffering would have been avoided for himself and for Israel. We should be steadfast rather than stubborn—to seek and follow the Lord’s will without trying to get around it or change it.

Additional Teaching

Obeying the Lord

We can learn from Balaam the importance of obeying the Lord. We can also learn this from the good examples of many other men and women in the scriptures. You may want to refer to the following examples:

a. The Savior, aware of the agony before him in Gethsemane and on the cross, “kneeled down, and prayed, saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:41–42).

b. When Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac, he “rose up early in the morning” to begin the journey to Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:3).

c. When Mary was told that she would be the mother of the Son of God, she responded, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word” (Luke 1:38).

d. When Nephi was instructed to return to Jerusalem to get the brass plates from Laban, he immediately responded, “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded” (1 Nephi 3:7).

e. The sons of Helaman were successful in battle because “they did obey and observe to perform every word of command with exactness” (Alma 57:21).

"And if thou art faithful unto the end thou shalt have a crown of immortality, and eternal life in the mansions which I have prepared in the house of my Father." (D&C 81:6)