NUMBERS

Chapter 23

*Balaam’s First Oracle*

**Balaam said, “Build me seven altars here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me.” 2 Balak did as Balaam said, and the two of them offered a bull and a ram on each altar. 3 Then Balaam said to Balak, “Stay here beside your offering while I go aside. Perhaps the Lord will come to meet with me. Whatever he reveals to me I will tell you.” Then he went off to a barren height. 4 God met with him, and Balaam said, “I have prepared seven altars, and on each altar I have offered a bull and a ram.” 5 The Lord put a message in Balaam’s mouth and said, “Go back to Balak and give him this message.” 6 So he went back to him and found him standing beside his offering, with all the princes of Moab. 7 Then Balaam uttered his oracle: “Balak brought me from Aram, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains. ‘Come,’ he said, ‘curse Jacob for me; come, denounce Israel.’ 8How can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced? 9 From the rocky peaks I see them, from the heights I view them. I see a people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations. 10Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my end be like theirs!” 11 Balak said to Balaam, “What have you done to me? I brought you to curse my enemies, but you have done nothing but bless them!” 12 He answered, “Must I not speak what the Lord puts in my mouth?”**

**Ch 23** Balaam sacrificed a bull and a ram on each of seven altars (vv 2, 14, 30). Except for the last instance, he left Balak and his princes at the altars in order to “meet” the Lord. Then he returned to them with the word of the Lord (vv 3–6, 15–17). (TLSB)

**23:1** *seven altars … seven bulls and seven rams.* These sacrifices were prepared as a part of Balaam’s pagan actions. The number seven (signifying completeness) was held in high regard among Semitic peoples in general; the many animals would provide abundant liver and organ materials for the diviner from the east. (CSB)

**23:2** *Balak did as Balaam said.* Balaam is in charge; Balak is now his subordinate. (CSB)

**23:3** *bare height*. Mountains and hills were wooded in an earlier era, making stony heights stand out. (T:LSB)

**23:4** *God met Balaam*. Likely a theophany of God. (TLSB)

**23:5** *Lord* *put a word*. He equipped Balaam with an unmistakable message. (TLSB)

**23:7–24:24** There are seven poetic oracles here: The first four are longer, have introductory narrative bridges and are written in exquisite poetry (23:7–10; 23:18–24; 24:3–9; 24:15–19). The last three are brief, are much more difficult to understand, and follow one another in a staccato pattern (24:20, 21–22, 23–24). (CSB)

Each oracle presents new evidence that God’s favor rested on the covenant nation; this builds to a climax in the fourth oracle. The central thought of each blessing and summary sentences are as follows: God has made the seed of Abraham into a great multitude (23:10); Israel has the assurance of God’s unfailing promises (23:20); Israel will overcome all hostility (24:9); out of Israel, God will “in the latter days” (24:14) raise up a Ruler who will let His kingdom come (24:17). (TLSB)

**23:7–10** Balaam uttered his blessing on Israel in a discourse that made a mockery of Balak’s sinister intentions. (TLSB)

**23:7** *oracle.* Hebrew *mashal*, usually translated “proverb,” but here “oracle” is appropriate. By this word the distinctive nature of Balaam’s prophecies is established; none of the prophecies of Israel’s true prophets is described by this term. (CSB)

*curse*. God had blessed Israel and would continue to do so to establish His kingdom. (TLSB)

**23:9** *a people dwelling alone*. Israel is separate, holy, unique. (TLSB)

**23:8** *How can I curse those whom God has not cursed?* That which Balaam had been hired to do he was unable to do. God kept him from pronouncing a curse on his people, who were unlike the nations of the world (v. 9). (CSB)

**23:10** *Let me die the death of the righteous.* A wish not granted (see 31:8, 16). (CSB)

Balaam acknowledged that the Israelites were righteous in God’s sight. In His covenant of grace, God had declared them acceptable to Him despite their sins. (TLSB)

*may my end be like theirs!* He who had come to curse desired to share in Israel’s blessing. (CSB)

**23:11** *bless them*. Hyperbole. Poem does not explicitly bless Israel, but Balaam expresses longing to be like them, judging them upright (v 10). (TLSB)

Balaam’s four oracles. Balaam cannot curse the people whom God has not cursed (v 8). The Israelites are completely unaware that Balak seeks their harm. As Christians, we, too, are often oblivious to the many spiritual and earthly forces that seek our destruction. Thankfully, God is not oblivious to them and stretches out His mighty hand to protect us. • We praise You, O Lord, for the abundant blessings You grant each day. Deliver us from evil. Amen. (TLSB)

*Balaam’s Second Oracle*

**13 Then Balak said to him, “Come with me to another place where you can see them; you will see only a part but not all of them. And from there, curse them for me.” 14 So he took him to the field of Zophim on the top of Pisgah, and there he built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each altar. 15 Balaam said to Balak, “Stay here beside your offering while I meet with him over there.” 16 The Lord met with Balaam and put a message in his mouth and said, “Go back to Balak and give him this message.” 17 So he went to him and found him standing beside his offering, with the princes of Moab. Balak asked him, “What did the Lord say?” 18 Then he uttered his oracle: “Arise, Balak, and listen; hear me, son of Zippor. 19God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill? 20I have received a command to bless; he has blessed, and I cannot change it. 21“No misfortune is seen in Jacob, no misery observed in Israel.The Lord their God is with them; the shout of the King is among them. 22God brought them out of Egypt; they have the strength of a wild ox. 23There is no sorcery against Jacob, no divination against Israel. It will now be said of Jacob and of Israel, ‘See what God has done!’ 24 The people rise like a lioness; they rouse themselves like a lion that does not rest till he devours his prey and drinks the blood of his victims.” 25 Then Balak said to Balaam, “Neither curse them at all nor bless them at all!” 26 Balaam answered, “Did I not tell you I must do whatever the Lord says?”**

**23:13** *a part but not all.* Balak attempted to reduce Israel’s power by selecting a point where their immense numbers would be obscured. Unfortunately for Balak, the oracle that followed (vv. 18–24) exceeded the first in its blessing on Israel. (CSB)

Balak seems to think that Balaam is impressed by Israel’s grandeur (cf v 10a). He suggests a different vantage point, which diminishes the people. (TLSB)

**23:14** *field of Zophim*. Lit, “the field of the watchers”; unidentified place. (TLSB)

**23:19** *God is not a man, that he should lie.* These sublime words describe the immutability of the Lord and the integrity of his word. Balaam is a foil for God—constantly shifting, prevaricating, equivocating, changing—a prime example of the distinction between God and man. (CSB)

**23:19** *not man*. Iren: “He thus shows that all men are indeed guilty of falsehood, inasmuch as they change from one thing to another” (*ANF* 1:572). (TLSB)

*change His mind*. Chem: “Many in all ages have gone astray by trying to imitate these laws of Moses … [arguing from Nu 23:19 that] the ceremonial and civil laws which have come from God are not subject to change. Reply: God gave the laws in such a way that they were not to continue in perpetuity but to a certain time, until the Seed [Christ] should come, and then be abrogated, Heb. 9:10 ‘imposed until the time of reformation’ ” (*LTh* 2:347, 351) . (TLSB)

**23:21** *misfortune* … *trouble*. Israel deserved and received God’s punishment for her unfaithfulness to Him. (TLSB)

*the shout of the King is among them.* That the first explicit declaration of the Lord’s kingship in the Pentateuch was made by Balaam is a suitable improbability. Because God is King, he was able to use Balaam for his own ends—to bless his people in a new and wonderful manner. (CSB)

Anticipates that Israel will arise in power (cf Gn 49:8–10). (TLSB)

**23:22** *wild ox.* Or “aurochs” or “oryx,” a traditional image of power in the ancient Near East (see also 24:8). (CSB)

Strong for defense. (TLSB)

**23:23–24** Balaam is stripped of his usual weapons (enchantment, divination. (TLSB)

**23:23** *no sorcery against Jacob.* Balaam speaks from his frightful experience. He had no means in his bag of tricks to withstand God’s blessing of Israel. (CSB)

**23:24** *like a lioness.* Israel was about to arise and devour its foes, like a lioness on the hunt (see 24:9; Ge 49:9). (CSB)

**23:25** In frustration, Balak gives up. (TLSB)

*Balaam’s Third Oracle*

**27 Then Balak said to Balaam, “Come, let me take you to another place. Perhaps it will please God to let you curse them for me from there.” 28 And Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor, overlooking the wasteland. 29 Balaam said, “Build me seven altars here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me.” 30 Balak did as Balaam had said, and offered a bull and a ram on each altar.**

**23:27** *please God*. Balak persists in the hope that God will turn against His people. (TLSB)

**23:28** *top of Peor*. Like Bamoth-baal, this may have been a high place on which the god Peor was worshiped. (TLSB)

*overlooks the desert*. Not even looking at Israel anymore. (TLSB)

**23:13–30** For a second time, seven altars are constructed—this time atop Pisgah (v 14). The results are the same. God does not change His mind as humans do (v 19). What God has blessed must remain blessed; therefore, Balaam must bless Israel as well. He can say only what God has commanded him to say. God’s Word is changeless, and He dwells with His people to bless them. • “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace” (Nu 6:24–26). Amen. (TLSB)