

NUMBERS

Chapter 23

Balaam's First Oracle

And Balaam said to Balak, “Build for me here seven altars, and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams.” 2 Balak did as Balaam had said. And Balak and Balaam offered on each altar a bull and a ram. 3 And Balaam said to Balak, “Stand beside your burnt offering, and I will go. Perhaps the LORD will come to meet me, and whatever he shows me I will tell you.” And he went to a bare height, 4 and God met Balaam. And Balaam said to him, “I have arranged the seven altars and I have offered on each altar a bull and a ram.” 5 And the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth and said, “Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak.” 6 And he returned to him, and behold, he and all the princes of Moab were standing beside his burnt offering. 7 And Balaam took up his discourse and said, From Aram Balak has brought me, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains: ‘Come, curse Jacob for me, and come, denounce Israel!’ 8 How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced? 9 For from the top of the crags I see him, from the hills I behold him; behold, a people dwelling alone, and not counting itself among the nations! 10 Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part[a] of Israel? Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his!” 11 And Balak said to Balaam, “What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have done nothing but bless them.” 12 And he answered and said, “Must I not take care to 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 *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 upright.* 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 his! 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 And Balak said to him, “Please come with me to another place, from which you may see them. You shall see only a fraction of them and shall not see them all. Then curse them for me from there.” **14** And he took him to the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah, and built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each altar. **15** Balaam said to Balak, “Stand here beside your burnt offering, while I meet the LORD over there.” **16** And the LORD met Balaam and put a word in his mouth and said, “Return to Balak, and thus shall you speak.” **17** And he came to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering, and the princes of Moab with him. And Balak said to him, “What has the LORD spoken?” **18** And Balaam took up his discourse and said, “Rise, Balak, and hear; give ear to me, O son of Zippor: **19** God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? **20** Behold, I received a command to bless: he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it. **21** He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob, nor has he seen trouble in Israel.

The LORD their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them. 22 God brings them out of Egypt and is for them like the horns of the wild ox. 23 For there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel; now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, ‘What has God wrought!’ 24 Behold, a people! As a lioness it rises up and as a lion it lifts itself; it does not lie down until it has devoured the prey and drunk the blood of the slain.” 25 And Balak said to Balaam, “Do not curse them at all, and do not bless them at all.” 26 But Balaam answered Balak, “Did I not tell you, ‘All that the LORD says, that I must do?’” 27 And Balak said to Balaam, “Come now, I will take you to another place. Perhaps it will please God that you may curse them for me from there.” 28 So Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor, which overlooks the desert. 29 And Balaam said to Balak, “Build for me here seven altars and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams.” 30 And 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)