

Series: STUFF WE MISSED: Extraordinary Stories from An Extraordinary God

August 15, 2010

BALAAM'S DONKEY

Numbers 22:21-35

1. Has anyone here seen the movie, **Dr. Dolittle**? What makes it a favorite among kids is that it brings to life the fantasy that every kid has—that their pet can talk. Tell funny jokes. Tell them what it's **really** like to go to the vet. Did anyone here ever talk to your pet as a kid? How many of you are **still** talking to them? Cats ignore you; dogs act **least** act interested—but they never talk back.

-When I was a kid we had a dog named **Skippy**. Skippy had **lots** of personality. He even smiled. He'd roll up his lips, flatten out his ears, snort, wag his tail—and expose his teeth with a broad smile that looked a little like Jimmy Carter. But he never talked—at least that I'm aware of.

-The Bible describes some very strange incidents—but the story we're going to talk about this morning—about Balaam's talking donkey—has to be the most peculiar one. I mean, you can just imagine what it must've looked like—maybe like **Mister Ed**. There are some parts of the story that are **really** funny—and prove that God has a magnificent sense of humor. In reality, God is asking the question, "Who's the **real** talking donkey here?"

-But the story ends with an incredibly sobering plunge into reality. It's a story of how God uses some unusual means to get us off a path that's leading to disaster. If you are on a path in life that is moving away from God—maybe ever so slightly, this story is for you.

2. Now, who was **Balaam**? Anyone remember Merlin, from the King Arthur's Roundtable fame? Well, you could call Balaam the Merlin of the Middle East. He was a big deal--probably the best-known, most-powerful, most-feared wizard and sorcerer in the world of his day. In fact, archaeologists found some of his prophecies carved in stone. His name means *devourer* or *destroyer*--and no one messed with him. If you wanted to delve into the psychic, the supernatural, the totally weird, Balaam was your man. He was a walking spiritual **warehouse**. If it was out there, he had dabbled in it or knew where to get it. And he apparently had quite a price-tag--and an ego to match.

-I just need to say this in the way of warning. The Bible is very specific about the paranormal—psychics, spiritualists, mediums—warning us that when we dabble with this, we are exposing ourselves to dark forces. This isn't a story about how God **used** that stuff; it's a story about God offering grace to a man who was deeply entrenched in it. And by the end of the story, Balaam understands that God cannot be fooled or controlled.

- a. Let me set up the story. It's about 1400 B.C. and the nation of Israel, recently released from slavery in Egypt was **terrifying** every nation who had heard of them. They were camped near a country called Moab, and the king, Balak was

shaking in his boots. So he decided to get some help from Balaam. So he sends some men with a message:

Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed." (Numbers 22:6 TNIV)

-Balaam says,

"Spend the night here...and I will report back to you with the answer the LORD gives me." (Numbers 22:8 TNIV)

Now, he *sounds* like a genuine prophet from God, but he wasn't. Ever heard of an insurance broker? They work with multiple companies to get you the best deal. Balaam is a kind of broker of spiritual services—wherever they happen to come from. His style was to at least *pretend* to cooperate so he can get spiritual forces to do what he wants. His mistake is assuming that Israel's God is just another force to be *manipulated*.

- b. The fascinating thing about this story is that the God who created the universe speaks to Balaam—works with him! Now, the short version of the entire narrative is that God makes it clear to Balaam that His blessing on Israel cannot—and *will* not be over-ridden. So Balaam sends these guys back to Balak saying, **No!**

-Well, Balak sends *more* envoys to sweeten the deal to offer more money—with this message:

Do not let anything keep you from coming to me, because I will reward you handsomely and do whatever you say. Come and put a curse on these people for me." (Numbers 22:16-17 TNIV)

-Balaam is either wise—or really sneaky. His response is,

Even if Balak gave me all the silver and gold in his palace, *I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the LORD my God.* (Numbers 22:19 TNIV)

Notice that he claims the Lord as his God.

-Well, this time God says,

...Go with them, but do only what I tell you. (Numbers 22:20 TNIV)

A translation of the Bible called **The Message** is quite colorful in its description of what happens next:

Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went off with the noblemen from Moab. As he was going, though, God's anger flared. The

angel of GOD stood in the road to block his way. Balaam was riding his donkey, accompanied by his two servants. When the donkey saw the angel blocking the road and brandishing a sword, she veered off the road into the ditch. Balaam beat the donkey and got her back on the road. But as they were going through a vineyard, with a fence on either side, the donkey again saw GOD's angel blocking the way and veered into the fence, crushing Balaam's foot against the fence. Balaam hit her again. GOD's angel blocked the way yet again--a very narrow passage this time; there was no getting through on the right or left. Seeing the angel, Balaam's donkey sat down under him. Balaam lost his temper; he beat the donkey with his stick.

Then GOD gave speech to the donkey. She said to Balaam: "What have I ever done to you that you have beat me these three times?"

Balaam said, "Because you've been playing games with me! If I had a sword I would have killed you by now."

The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your trusty donkey on whom you've ridden for years right up until now? Have I ever done anything like this to you before? Have I?"

He said, "No."

Then GOD helped Balaam see what was going on: He saw GOD's angel blocking the way, brandishing a sword. Balaam fell to the ground, his face in the dirt.

GOD's angel said to him: "Why have you beaten your poor donkey these three times? I have come here to block your way because you're getting way ahead of yourself. The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If she hadn't, I would have killed you by this time, but not the donkey. I would have let her off."

Balaam said to GOD's angel, "I have sinned. I had no idea you were standing in the road blocking my way. If you don't like what I'm doing, I'll head back."

But GOD's angel said to Balaam, "Go ahead and go with them. But only say what I tell you to say--absolutely no other word."

And so Balaam continued to go with Balak's nobles
(Numbers 22:21-35, The Message)

3. Now, this is where the story sounds a little like the movie **Shrek**. And it's *funny!* It starts quite normally. Balaam saddles and loads his donkey—the main means of transportation then—for a 300 to 400 mile trip. Then there's this curious statement:

But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose him. (Numbers 22:22 TNIV)

The question is—"Why is God angry when He gave Balaam permission to go?"

- a. A little detective work turns up something very interesting. Peter, in warning about the twisted motives of false teachers says:

They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Bezer who loved the wages of wickedness. But he was

rebuked for his wrongdoing by a donkey—an animal without speech—who spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet's madness. (2 Peter 2:15-16 TNIV)

-It seems that Balaam was doing something a *lot* of people do. They know the right language when it comes to God-talk--and it even *looks* like they're going in the right direction. But their hearts are totally headed someplace else. I think Balaam was thinking, "Man, I could have it made for the rest of my life! If I can tap into *this* God and His power like I have the others--who *wouldn't* pay me for advice?!"

-Quick confession. Anyone here ever done something a little deceitful—you know, where your face and your heart were going in very different directions? I have.

- b. That's, of course, where the talking donkey comes into the picture. It says in the narrative that the angel of the Lord stood in the road—ready to take Balaam out if he took another step. But Balaam, the spiritual guru—the great Seer of all things—doesn't even have a clue that he is riding right into disaster.

-Fortunately, Balaam's lowly donkey sees what he can't—and saves his life by taking galloping off across a field. Balaam thinks she's just being stubborn, so he whacks her. Well, this happens two more times. You *have* to snicker as you read the accounts.

-The second time, they're on this narrow road between vineyards surrounded by stone walls. The donkey sees the angel, backs up, and presses up against the wall--smashing Balaam's foot between her side and the wall. It's like a Bugs Bunny cartoon. I can just imagine Balaam, hopping around on one foot, "Ow, ow, ow, ow..." and he beats on his donkey one more time.

-The final time, the angel stood on a narrow place in the road, presumably between two cliffs--and there wasn't room to even turn around--so the donkey just flops down and refuses to move--kinda like a 3 year old pulling a tantrum in a supermarket.

-Well, that's the last straw. Balaam is livid! He takes his staff and begins to beat the bejeebers out of this poor animal. Now, why do you think he did that? It's clear in this story that Balaam and his donkey weren't riding alone. I wouldn't at *all* be surprised if the nobles with him were snickering, "This big deal sorcerer—*The Destroyer—whooo!* can't even control his donkey, let alone another nation!" Balaam has this massive ego—and the one thing you don't want to do is humiliate someone who thinks they're hot stuff!

- c. Of course, the most shocking thing that happened that day was when God opens this donkey's mouth, and she says, "*Hey! CUT THAT OUT!* Why are you beating me up! What have I ever done to you?" I've often wondered if her lips moved—you know, like Mr. Ed!

-Amazingly, Balaam has a conversation with the donkey! "***If I had a SWORD in my hand, I would kill you right now.***" I have to wonder if the people with him got creeped out. "Man, this is ***too*** weird! Blair Witch Project #3!"

-But the humor of the picture stops right there. Balaam comes to this stunning realization that the sword is in ***God's*** hand—and ***he's*** the one who's been spared. And what he sees almost puts him in cardiac arrest—and he falls on his face.

"Why did you beat your donkey those three times?" the angel of the Lord demanded. "Look, I have come to block your way because you are stubbornly resisting me. Three times the donkey saw me and shied away; otherwise, I would certainly have killed you by now and spared the donkey." (Numbers 22:32-33 NLT)

-I want you to see the complete irony of this. The Lord is saying, "Oh Balaam, great seer of the future, wizard of mankind, channeler of spirits, advisor of kings--your ***donkey*** saw what you couldn't and saved your scrawny hide!" You can be ***really*** smart, the best in your field, counselor of others--and impale your life on the obvious! Never even realize that you're on a reckless path with a sword in it!

-Balaam humbly says, "***I have sinned!*** Lord, ***you*** tell me what to do--and I'll do it. Want me to go back? I'll go back." But the Lord says, "Go with these men--but you say what ***I*** tell you to say." My guess is that God had Balaam's undivided attention, don't you think?

4. The narrative goes on to tell us that Balaam finally arrived safely in Moab and met with Balak. You sense that, at least temporarily, he's a changed man.. Balak says, "Why, you old stubborn son of a gun! You finally believed that I could make this worth your while, did ya?! Pull this off, and you're going to be a ***set for life!***"

-But Balaam's stomach is still quivering from his close encounter with the sword in the road. He cautiously says with one eye toward Heaven, "Uh, I'm not free to say what I feel like saying!"

-Balaam then turns to ***hepatoscopy***-- a practice used by diviners in that culture to find hidden information. Sounds like something doctors put rubber gloves on to do, doesn't it? The person wanting information would take the entrails of a sacrificed animal—particularly the liver—and examine them. What ***I*** find amazing is that even though this was a crude pagan practice, God ***still*** stooped and spoke to Balaam that day!

- a. The prophecies of Balaam over Israel were profound—and have enough content for several months of messages—which I'm not going to give you. But briefly, in the first message, Balaam admitted that when ***God of the universe*** blesses a person or nation, ***he*** doesn't have the power to reverse it. And he makes this statement:

“Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my final end be like theirs!” (Numbers 23:10 TNIV)

- b. Well, that’s **not** what Balak wanted to hear! So, the king keeps shuffling Balaam from place to place—offering burnt offerings at each place—hoping for a different outcome. And each time—all five of them—Balaam blesses Israel and proclaims **Who** their God is.

-He says, "Balak, this God is Holy; He's not a man! He doesn't lie, He doesn't change his mind, He can't be bribed. If he tells you something will happen—it **will happen!** Sorcery, witchcraft, divination doesn't work against the people He loves and protects. Even though Balak gets angry and refuses to pay him, Balaam goes on to prophesy what Israel will do to all the surrounding nations. And **here’s** what is most phenomenal about this whole story: Balaam closes with an amazing prophecy of Christ’s coming!

5. There are some amazing principles in this story that I think can spare you and me a truckload of heartache. See, this story of Balaam and his talking donkey tells us how God deals with stubborn, wayward people. People who sometimes lose their way—get on reckless, dangerous detours. Balaam learned something we have **got** to understand about God. He does not wait around for us to shoe-horn Him into our plans—you know, when it’s convenient.

-Sometimes when our eyes are opened to Jesus—and we feel grace and forgiveness for the very first time, we say, “God, **You** tell me what to do, and I’ll **do it!**” But over time we get sidetracked. Our passion wanes. On the outside, it **looks** like we’re faithful—but the truth is—other things are lined up on the runway **before** God.

-And sometimes we begin to think that we can use God. That He’s stupid enough to be **coerced** into making us successful in the gods we actually love more than Him. Remember--a god, little “g” is anything becomes the driving force in our lives. Remember the messages on idols? An idol is where we make our sacrifices. And idol is **anything** or **anyone** we put before God--ego, success, money, a boyfriend, kids, our appearance, our stuff. But God will not join up with the other gods. We have to choose. What, or who have you chosen?

6. There’s another principle here that I, at times, have had to learn the **hard** way. Sometimes, as with Balaam, there is a **sword** in our road--and we’re **oblivious** to it. Several years ago, Lori and I were returning to Toronto from Chicago. Just as the wheels were about to touch the runway—the engines went to full throttle—the plane went up on this steep angle. The pilot came over the loudspeaker and said, “That’s what we call an aborted landing.” Apparently there was a **truck** in the middle of the runway! Glad he didn’t land!

-God's opening comment on sin--choosing any other path besides what He asks us to do or not to do--is that it brings death. Proverbs says,

There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.
(Proverbs 14:12 TNIV)

The landing seems right—but there's a TRUCK ON THE RUNWAY! There is a **sword in the road**.

-It's critical to see this. Even though Balaam was headed in the right direction—**technically**—God says, "You are on a **reckless path before me!**"

- a. Why is it that we're so blind sometimes? Why is it that we can't see what a **donkey** can see? We are sometimes blind to our danger because in that secret place inside, we don't really **want** to do what God asks. It seems counter-intuitive to our happiness—i.e., what **we** want. It's a form of arrogance. "God has a plan—I have a better plan. I don't **need** God!"

-And the truth is that we may have fooled everyone else—cause we're worshipping, giving money, helping with God's mission—but in our **hearts**, we're going in another direction. The pull can be different things—grudges, success, image, security, popularity, sexual desires, loneliness—but we're on the wrong path. And, truth is--we're **faking** it!

-I say this from **experience**. As I've looked over my life, there have been times in my life when others probably thought I was fine, but **truthfully?** I was headed for the truck on the runway! It was my need to be **right**. Or to be liked and accepted. God says that sin, defiance, is a **reckless path**. **There's a truck on the runway—and if you change direction, you're going to slam right into it!**

- See, sin has a built-in penalty system. And if you refuse to listen, it will do way more damage than you'd ever believe and, ultimately, **you** will play the donkey. Not only will you get hurt, everyone on your plane, to continue the analogy, is at risk.

-Some of you, today, right now, are on a detour. And there's a messenger from God with a sword in his hand in your path. You need to know that this is not a false alarm or a singing telegram. The sword in the road is not there to wreck your day! It's there to **save your life!**

- b. Enter--the **donkey!** By the way, the donkey's name was **Grace**. God will not let us hit the sword without a warning. I've played the donkey lots of times—maybe I'm playing it again this morning. Paul once told a group of people who were **way** off track—but thought they were super wise:

Since the world in all its fancy wisdom never had a clue when it came to knowing God, God in his wisdom took delight in using what the world considered dumb—preaching, of all things!—to bring those who trust him into the way of salvation. (1 Corinthians 1:21 MSG)

-In this story, Balaam accuses the donkey of making a fool out of him. The donkey could've said, "Balaam--you're the one making a colossal ass of yourself."

-Why don't we listen when God tries to get our attention? Well, mostly because our eyes are blinded and our ears are plugged by our ego. Our fragile ego can't handle the thought that we missed the turn in the road. ***Moi? Me? Do something selfish and evil and stupid? No way!!***

-Let me clarify ***who*** the donkey is. It's the person who speaks truth that conflicts with our version of reality; sometimes the one who irritates and angers us with penetrating questions. So. I want to ask ***you***: Who's the donkey in your life that God is trying to speak through? See, many times it's someone we don't ***want*** to listen to.

-Some of you teens have parents who you think are donkeys--and you're hell-bent on hitting the sword. You don't think they know what they're talking about. Some of you have spouses who are playing the part of the donkey--you're too proud to listen to them.

-Donkey's can be lots of things: Sometimes it's our health. Sometimes it's speeding tickets or accidents. Sometimes it's venereal disease. Sometimes it's friends who walk away from us—or the threat of public exposure. It can be neighbors, kids, headlines, bosses, employees. Even pastors. That's okay--I don't mind being the donkey. I do that a lot.

- c. See, donkey's cause pain. Embarrassment. They bang our legs up against the wall, take detours, lay down under us. Now, what's our typical response? Let's take a poll on what the ***normal*** response is:

*Thank the donkey!

*Give the donkey a sugar cube.

*Kick the donkey. #1 answer among people surveyed! "Stupid donkey--why won't you do what I tell you to do!" There are lots of ways to do this. Name a few.

-Anyone here ever played the donkey and gotten beaten up? It's really not very much fun to be verbally abused, made fun of, kicked around, or frozen out of someone's life. And, of course, that's the point, isn't it? If you can make the donkey shut up—then ***maybe*** the truth it's trying to tell us will just go away, too!

-Remember what Balaam, this pagan sorcerer ultimately said about God? He's not like a man! He doesn't change his mind! He doesn't speak to hear himself talk! He doesn't change the rules about life for me--or for you.

-The donkey's telling the truth! And if you ***are*** the donkey? Well, don't overplay your part. Your role is to speak, not coerce. And ***expect*** some abuse. Sometimes people initially feel embarrassed and angry. But don't let that stop you—you may save their life!

7. Let me mention another critical principle we can learn from this story of the talking donkey. ***No one can curse what God has blessed—and no one can bless what***

GOD has cursed. The point of life, the point of following Jesus—is to ***align your life with what God has already blessed!***

-There is a way that God has blessed. He sent His Son, Jesus, to reveal it. If you want blessed? Well, align your life with truth.

-Sometimes--just like this king—it's personal. We don't like someone and we don't want them to succeed. Maybe it's because of our fear of loss, or because we're threatened by their success, their competence, their looks—or something. God tells us here, "You can't curse what I've blessed, and you can't bless what I've cursed!"
DEAL WITH IT! Grow up!

-That should be ***tremendous*** news for some of you this morning. If you're right in the center of God's will, you need to know that even if it doesn't feel very good, ***nothing, no one*** can curse you! Even if they're a big-deal sorcerer!

8. There's one final principle in this story this morning. It's found in the end of the story--which I actually haven't told you yet. The way this part of the story ends—with Balaam's blessings and prophecies—you'd guess that this sorcerer has chosen to wholeheartedly follow God. Truth is, his heart never really changed--and it destroyed his life.

-The short of it is that Balaam actually used his insight into the character of God to as a weapon against the Israelites. See, he found out that God is a holy God who judges sin. His plan was to tempt the Israelite men with young temple prostitutes from the nation of Midian. That plan was a smashing success—24,000 Israelite men took a swan dive into the cesspool and died.

-But it didn't end there. The whole Midianite nation—who had hired Balaam--was annihilated. The record says,

"They also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword." (Numbers 31:8 TNIV)

Balaam who, by the grace of God, evaded the sword the first time, eventually walked right into it because he ***wouldn't listen***. The question you have to ask yourself is, "Who was the donkey—really?"

- a. Question: Why would God go to so much trouble with Balaam? I believe He loved Balaam and wanted to show him a new way. The incredible tragedy of this story is that Balaam ***felt*** God's presence. He saw the beauty of God. He spoke God's word, felt God's Spirit on his life. He prophesied about the coming Messiah. He said that he wanted to die the death of the righteous. But he didn't. He just died.

-I don't know what took him down. Maybe it was his huge ego--and He just couldn't submit it to God. Maybe it was his renowned reputation as a big deal broker of spiritual resources that he just couldn't give up. Maybe it was the big-time money. Peter says he ***loved*** the wages of wickedness.

- b. Know what the truth is? Some people **learn** LOTS of stuff about God, but their hearts never change. God speaks and speaks; God sends donkey after donkey to warn them about the truck on the runway—but they won't listen. And a lot of people do exactly what Balaam did. They do cosmetic, skin-deep faith. They pretend. But it's all designed to advance their own agenda—to USE GOD—but their hearts never really change.

-If Balaam had truly turned to God, thousands upon thousands of lives would've been saved--including his own. Strange, isn't it, that the donkey out-lived Balaam. The narrative tells us that 61,000 donkeys were captured--and divided among the Israelites. Someone got a talking donkey--and they never realized it. And Balaam will be forever remembered as the false prophet who just wouldn't submit to God.

9. As I close, I need to tell you that the **only** reason I'm standing here this morning is because God faithfully sent His messengers to warn me that I was on a reckless path before God. It scares me to see how close I've come to the sword in my life.
-There have been times when I wasn't sure I would survive the purifying process. There were times when, like Balaam, I was embarrassed and angry at the donkey--the messenger God was using to speak to me. Times when I wanted to beat the donkey--trash the person who delivered the message. But I have found that in listening, there's life.

-There's one thing you need to know—the reckless path leads to death. Oh, it may not kill you--but it will destroy what you want most. It destroys people you love, it destroys reputations, it destroys the dreams for what you always wanted your life to be. It will ultimately humiliate you.

-Some of you are facing the sword in the road. You're on a reckless course. You know it—and so I ask, is what you are so enamored with--worth it? And I want to **plead** with you as God did with Balaam--Choose life. Choose life. Choose life.