

LESSON 2



CORNERSTONE CONNECTIONS

JULY 08 2023

greed: the bottomless pit

Scripture Story: Numbers 22–24.

Commentary: *Patriarchs and Prophets* (or *Beginning of the End*), chapter 40.

PREPARING TO TEACH

I. SYNOPSIS

When a pagan king saw the Israelites he was afraid and sent messengers to Balaam to put a supernatural curse on them. Balaam, though, pretended to have great integrity and told them no amount of money would get him to do that. Balaam was once a good man, a prophet of God even, but he had fallen away from the Lord and had given himself up to covetousness and greed. Yet he professed to be a servant of the Most High.

Balaam knew about God's miraculous work in behalf of Israel, and when the messengers announced their errand (to get him to curse Israel) he well knew that it was his duty to refuse the rewards of Balak and to dismiss the ambassadors. But he ventured to dally with temptation and urged the messengers to tarry with him that night, declaring that he could give no decided answer until he had asked counsel of the Lord. Deep down, though, he really wanted the money and he tempted God, all the while pretending to be pious. The Lord, of course, saw through Balaam's deceit. What follows next is a funny and yet at the same time sobering account of how the Lord dealt with the wayward man, a story that includes—among other things—a talking donkey. From this story we learn about how greed and covetousness can blind us to our true selves.

When you teach the lesson you might also point out that animal abuse is a sin (see Proverbs 12:10; Psalm 36:6; 147:9). Make sure the students know that animals are innocent but suffer in this world of sin, too. We should make their time on earth as

bearable as possible. Help the students realize how wrong it was for Balaam to strike the donkey. When the Angel of the Lord came to kill Balaam, the donkey turned away, thus saving Balaam from death.

II. TARGET

The students will:

- *Know* the consequences of pride and turning away from God.
- *Feel* God's power and know that, with Him, you cannot hide your self-righteousness, because He knows the heart.
- *Respond* by understanding that if they become immune to sin, they will go down the path of the unrighteous.

III. EXPLORE

The Nature of Humanity, Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Beliefs, No. 7

“Man and woman were made in the image of God with individuality, the power and freedom to think and to do. Though created free beings, each is an indivisible unity of body, mind, and spirit, dependent upon God for life and breath and all else. When our first parents disobeyed God, they denied their dependence upon Him and fell from their high position. The image of God in them was marred and they became subject to death. Their descendants share this fallen nature and its consequences. They are born with weaknesses and tendencies to evil. But God in Christ reconciled the world to Himself and by His Spirit restores in penitent mortals the image of their Maker. Created for the glory of God, they are called to love Him and one

another, and to care for their environment. (Gen. 1:26-28; 2:7, 15; 3; Ps. 8:4-8; 51:5, 10; 58:3; Jer. 17:9; Acts 17:24-28; Rom. 5:12-17; 2 Cor. 5:19, 20; Eph. 2:3; 1 Thess. 5:23; 1 John 3:4; 4:7, 8, 11, 20.)”

TEACHING

I. GETTING STARTED

Activity

Refer the students to the What Do You Think? section of their lesson. After they have completed it, discuss their responses.

Illustration

Share this illustration in your own words:

Imagine that a man was walking through the woods and spotted a bag of gems, gold, jewelry, and money. This man was homeless, hadn't eaten in a long time, and was weak. He knew that he would die if he didn't have food. But even though he was starving, he refused to take the bag because it didn't belong to him. So he walked into town to try to find an odd job in order to get some food. The man didn't know it, but someone had observed him in the woods. His honesty had reached the ears of people in the town. Everyone had great admiration for this man for doing the right thing, so he easily got a job to pay for food.

After a while, it was discovered that the bag of wealth belonged to a very rich man. The town thought that the wealthy man should give the poor man some of his money to honor him for not stealing. But the rich man didn't want to. He didn't care that the man respected him enough to not steal, but he knew that if he didn't give this man some money, he would appear selfish. So he gave the man some of the gold from the bag. He acted happy to be doing it for the man, but in his heart he was reluctant. Now, because of the rich man's "generosity," the people honored him more, not knowing that his heart was not in it.

In the end, both men did the "right" thing, but for different reasons.

II. TEACHING THE STORY

Bridge to the Story

Share the following in your own words:

Just like Balaam, the rich man did what everyone else thought was right, but his heart wasn't in the right place. Balaam told the Moabites he would not curse Israel, but not because he wanted to do the right thing. He just wanted to appear righteous. The rich man in this story did the same thing. He didn't care about the poor man; he cared about himself and how he would look.

Out of the Story for Teachers

After you read the Into the Story section with your students, use the following in your own words to process it with them.

- What was Balaam's feeling about the Moabites and the Israelites?
- Why did the Moabites desperately desire for Balaam to curse the Israelites?
- Why did Balaam refuse to go with the Moabites?
- What are some of the main lessons we can learn from the story?
- Why did Balaam so mercilessly strike the donkey that he rode?
- In what way did the abused donkey save Balaam's life?
- What parts of this story stand out to you?
- What were some of the reasons that Balaam turned away from God?
- Why did God send the Angel of the Lord to slay Balaam as he rode to Moab?
- Do you ever want to do the "right" thing for the wrong reason?
- Is it better to do the wrong thing for the right reason, or to do the right thing for the wrong reason?
- Who was the source of Balaam's greed and covetousness?
- Why did Balaam refuse to curse the Israelites when the servants of Moab asked him to?
- Compare ways in which Balaam was covetous with ways that we are sometimes covetous today. What similarities are there? What differences?
- How did Balaam appear to hide his true heart from God?

- What are some ways in which you try to hide your true self from God?

Sharing Context and Background

Use the following information to shed more light on the story for your students. Share it in your own words.

“Midianites. The Midianites are a people living in the southern portions of the Transjordan region. They are described as the descendants of Abraham and Keturah (Genesis 25:1-6) and operate as traders and caravaners in the Joseph narrative (Genesis 37:25-36). Moses joins the Midianite clan of Jethro after fleeing Egypt, but the Midianites do not join the Israelites in the conquest of Canaan. In the Balaam narrative, the Midianite elders are allied with the Moabites and participate in the hiring of the prophet to curse Israel.”—*Bible Background Commentary*

“Balaam at Deir Allah. In 1967 a Dutch archaeological expedition led by H. J. Franken discovered some inscribed pieces of plaster at a site in Jordan known as Deir ‘Allah. The fragments are apparently written in Aramaic and date to about 850 B.C. They mention Balaam son of Beor, the same figure described as a ‘seer’ in Numbers 22–24. Although the text is very fragmentary, with many breaks and uncertain words, it can be established that Balaam was a seer who received a divine message during the night and that his message was not what his neighbors expected to hear. Whether this text refers to the events described in the Bible is questionable, but it does establish a nonbibli-



Tips for Top-Notch Teaching

Safe Sharing

It is important that each student have an opportunity to participate. Even if a student is very uncomfortable speaking out loud, opportunities can be given for thinking and writing things down. Even if the student chooses not to share, he or she will have engaged in the process of thinking and applying.

In this lesson the students might be asked to write down sinful actions in everyday life to which it is easy for one’s conscience to become immune (e.g., cheating on tests, speaking disrespectfully to parents, etc.), and then fold their papers. Read the papers from the front and let students comment from their perspective. Even if a shy student does not say anything, their input has contributed to the overall discussion.

cal tradition current in the ninth century of a prophet named Balaam. It may be that Balaam’s notoriety was such that he remained an important prophetic figure for centuries and could thus be identified with the earlier Israelite narratives of the conquest.”—*Bible Background Commentary*

“Prophetic status of Balaam. In Joshua 13:22, Balaam is described as a ‘soothsayer,’ while in

Teaching From . . .

Refer your students to the other sections of their lesson. Invite students to share the key text with the class if they have committed it to memory.

- **Key Text**

Invite the students to share the key text with the class if they have committed it to memory.

- **Flashlight**

Read the Flashlight statement, pointing out that most of the time it is from the commentary on this week’s story found in the book *Patriarchs and Prophets*. Ask what relationship they see between the statement and what they have just discussed from *Out of the Story*.

- **Punch Lines**

Point out to your students the verses listed in their lesson that relate to this week’s story. Have them share the verse that spoke most directly to them and allow them to explain why they chose it.

- **Further Insight**

Ask them how the quote in Further Insight conveys the point of the story in this lesson.

Numbers 22:6 he is said to be a man whose blessings and curses are effective. He is from the region of upper Mesopotamia, near Carchemish, and has an international reputation as a true prophet. Throughout the narrative in Numbers 22–24, Balaam continually reminds Balak that he can speak only the words which God gives him to speak (Numbers 22:18, 38; 23:12, 26; 24:13). Although Balaam uses sacrificial rituals to obtain God’s answer, he is not to be considered simply a diviner. Divination, while sometimes used by Mesopotamian prophets, is more often associated with cultic personnel who examine sacrificial animals or natural conditions (flights of birds, etc.). In each case, Balaam seems to have direct communication with God and then speaks God’s word in the form of oracles to Balak. This is the typical form of prophetic address found in the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and other Israelite prophets. Spoken oracles are also recorded in over fifty Mari texts (a few centuries earlier than Balaam, about 250 miles downstream from Carchemish). Through either lay people or temple personnel, various messages are offered to Zimri-Lim, king of Mari, from various deities. Therefore it is clear that prophetic activity in the ancient Near East during this general time period was not uncommon.” —*Bible Background Commentary*

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III. CLOSING

Activity

Close with an activity and debrief it in your own words.

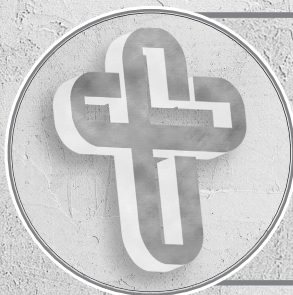
Have the students make a list of three different ways that greed can control us, and three ways to keep greed from overpowering us. Then ask them to share their lists and discuss together ways in which they could apply what has been discussed in their everyday lives.

Conclude with ideas from the summary below, making sure that the lessons you have drawn and discussed from this lesson are clear.

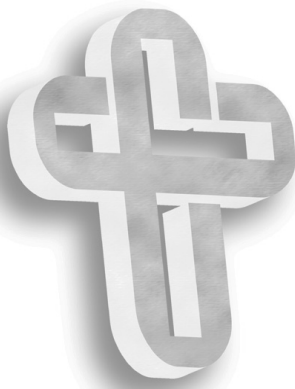
Summary

Share the following thoughts in your own words:

The story of Balaam is about how greed can turn you away from God. It shows us that even though Balaam was once a righteous man, once he started down the wrong path it was easier and easier to continue. And, even though the devil controlled him, he still tried to make it appear as if he did the right thing by not cursing the Israelites—just so he could look righteous. But God knows the heart. There is nothing we can hide and there is nothing we should hide from God. To try would be useless. He sees our every move, but even when we sin He will always forgive us when we allow the Holy Spirit to bring us to genuine repentance.



Remind the students about the reading plan, which will take them through the inspired commentary of the Bible, the Conflict of the Ages Series. The reading that goes with this lesson is *Patriarchs and Prophets* (or *Beginning of the End*), chapter 40.



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STUDENT LESSON

Scripture Story: Numbers 22–24.

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greed: the bottomless pit



Photo by Bill Wolf

flashlight

"Balaam 'loved the wages of unrighteousness.' 2 Peter 2:15. The sin of covetousness, which God declares to be idolatry, had made him a timeserver, and through this one fault Satan gained entire control of him. It was this that caused his ruin. The tempter is ever presenting worldly gain and honor to entice men from the service of God. He tells them it is their overconscientiousness that keeps them from prosperity. Thus many are induced to venture out of the path of strict integrity. One wrong step makes the next easier, and they become more and more presumptuous" (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 439).

keytext

"Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the Angel of the LORD standing in the way with His drawn sword in His hand; and he bowed his head and fell flat on his face."

(Numbers 22:31, NKJV)

what do you think?

Desperate for money, a young man held up a store, even though his conscience told him it was wrong. Before long he committed more and more crimes, and the more he committed, the less it bothered him. The more wrong he did, the less wrong it seemed. He finally became completely immune to his guilt over the thievery.

Why did the young man become immune to his guilt?

did you know?

Even one wrong trait of character, one sinful desire, persistently cherished, will eventually neutralize all the power of the gospel. Every sinful indulgence strengthens the soul's aversion to God." —Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 34.

INTO THE STORY

"That night God came to Balaam and said, 'Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you.'

"Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the Moabite officials. But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose him. . . . When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, it turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat it to get it back on the road.

"Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path through the vineyards, with walls on both sides. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. So he beat the donkey again.

"Then the angel of the LORD moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it lay down under Balaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?'

"Balaam answered the donkey, 'You have made a fool of me! If only I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now.'

"The donkey said to Balaam, 'Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?'

" 'No,' he said.

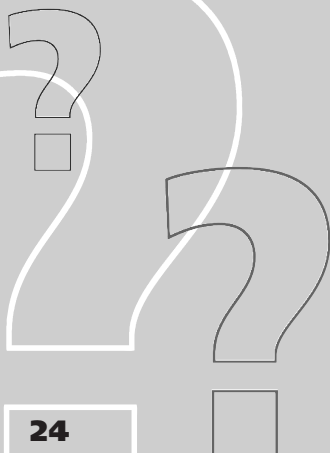
"Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell face-down.

"The angel of the LORD asked him, 'Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me. The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared it.'

"Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, 'I have sinned. I did not realize you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now if you are displeased, I will go back.'

"The angel of the LORD said to Balaam, 'Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you.' So Balaam went with Balak's officials."

(Numbers 22:20-35, NIV)



OUT OF THE STORY

Why did the Moabites call to Balaam for help?

Why did Balaam refuse to go with the Moabites? Was it his love for God or his pride?

What was Balaam's reaction when he saw the Angel of the Lord before him?

Why did God open the mouth of the donkey and let it speak?

Why did the Moabites want Balaam to curse the Israelites?

Name some of Balaam's good attributes.

Name some of Balaam's bad attributes.

Why did Balaam decline the bribe of the princes? Was it his love for God that made him decline it, or did he do so because he wanted to appear as if he were faithful and obedient?

What can we learn from this story about how God communicates with us?

punch lines

"O thou that dwellest upon many waters, abundant in treasures, thine end is come, and the measure of thy covetousness" (**Jeremiah 51:13, KJV**).

"Woe to him that coveteth an evil covetousness to his house, that he may set his nest on high, that he may be delivered from the power of evil!" (**Habakkuk 2:9, KJV**).

"But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication" (**Revelation 2:14, KJV**).

"Woe unto them! for they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gain-saying of Core" (**Jude 11, KJV**).

"Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (**Hebrews 13:5, KJV**).

further insight

"It is a perilous thing to allow an unchristian trait to live in the heart. One cherished sin will, little by little, debase the character, bringing all its nobler powers into subjection to the evil desire. The removal of one safeguard from the conscience, the indulgence of one evil habit, one neglect of the high claims of duty, breaks down the defenses of the soul and opens the way for Satan to come in and lead us astray. The only safe course is to let our prayers go forth daily from a sincere heart."—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 452.

connectingtolife

Sabbath

Read Habakkuk 2:9.

Do you see yourself as being more like Balaam, or more like the donkey, when it comes to relating to God?

Ponder your actions. Consider whether or not you do things that you once thought were sinful, but now believe to be harmless. How can we protect ourselves from falling into that trap? Balaam was greedy; he wanted the riches the Moabites offered him, even though he knew that to curse the Israelites was not what God wanted. How can we stay conscious of what's wrong and what's right?

Sunday

Read Jeremiah 17:8-10.

Think about the young man in the *What Do You Think?* section. Do you ever find yourself doing things you know are wrong, and yet justifying them in your mind? What are ways you justify doing wrong?

Do you guiltlessly do things now that you used to think were wrong? If so, what brought about the change? Is there any way to return your conscience to its former state? Would you want to?

Monday

Read Proverbs 12:10; Psalm 36:6; 147:9.

Review the *Key Text* and ponder the fact that it took Balaam a lot longer than the donkey to realize a heavenly being was present.

Animals suffer along with the rest of humanity

because of sin. When Balaam struck the donkey that he rode, he was causing this innocent animal to suffer. God wants us to make the lives of His creatures as bearable as possible; actually, He says that our righteousness is revealed by our regard for our animals.

What are ways that you could help innocent animals that are being abused? One way would be to volunteer at an animal shelter.

Tuesday

Read Matthew 6:3.

Read this week's *Punch Lines*. Even though Balaam had fallen short on his love for God, he first told the Moabites he would not curse the Israelites in order to make himself seem full of integrity. He put on a disguise that made him appear righteous, when he really cared only about his own benefit, not what God wanted.

Ponder your own character and whether you do things for God or just to make yourself appear more righteous. Pray and ask for God's guidance, and do what God wants you to do because you love Him, not because you're worried about what others think of you.

Wednesday

Read Psalm 17:5.

Look at the quote in the *Further Insight* section. What does this quote warn about? What do you need to surrender to God to keep greed and sin from ruling in your life? Write them down and share them with someone else.

Thursday

Read Revelation 2:14.

Remember that God is all powerful. When God told Balaam not to curse the Israel-

ites, He meant it. Balaam thought he could hide from God by appearing to be righteous, but God knows the heart; He knows when we are sincere and when we aren't. God also knew that Balaam desired the wealth the Moabites offered him. He pretended not to want it, but God knew his heart. Ask yourself: Are there ways in which I am putting on masks, pretending to be what I am not?

Friday

Read Hebrews 13:5.

Read the *Flashlight* quote again. In what ways does covetousness work against your soul? What are ways in which you can combat covetousness in your own life? Is it possible to fight it in our own strength?

Consider volunteering with friends to work in a soup kitchen, or work with your church on another project to help the homeless. Active service to help others is one of the best ways we can work with God to combat covetousness in our own hearts.

this week's reading*

Patriarchs and Prophets (or Beginning of the End), chapter 40.

**Beginning of the End* is a special adaptation of *Patriarchs and Prophets*, created for you by the Ellen G. White Estate and Pacific Press®. Get more information about it at www.cornerstoneconnections.net/article/191/about-us/conflict-of-the-ages-companion-books#.URlhF1rBO9s. By following the weekly reading plan, you will read at least one book of the Conflict of the Ages Series each year.