

“IS THERE ANY WORD FROM THE LORD?”

Presented by

Blake Brown

If you listened carefully as Tyler presented his sermon (“That Is...Incredible”), you couldn’t help but understand and appreciate the main point that he was trying to get over to you by using so many different Old Testament examples. It is, in a word, **incredible** that the Israelites—to whom God had been so generous and kind, and for whom He had done so much—**continually failed to go to Him for guidance**, and **constantly disobeyed Him!** As Tyler pointed out in no uncertain terms, Moses, Joshua, and others repeatedly told God’s chosen people, “The Lord is sure to bless you...**but only if you will obey the Lord by diligently observing His commandments**” (Deuteronomy 15:4-5). Unfortunately, the Israelites steadfastly refused to learn that important lesson—and, as Tyler rightly remarked, they **suffered immeasurably as a result**.

Eventually, the Israelites’ stubborn, rebellious attitude resulted in the destruction of their nation. In 721 B.C.—in fulfillment of a prophecy from Isaiah that God one day would raise up the Assyrian nation to punish the disobedient Hebrews—the Assyrian army rose up against the Northern Kingdom of Israel and carried its people away into captivity. None of those Israelites was ever heard from again.

Then, in the waning days of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, God sent another prophet—Jeremiah—to His people to try to convince them to repent of their evil ways and return to Him. God Himself had told the Israelites many years earlier, “If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14). God **always** stood ready to forgive His people—if only they would “turn from their wicked ways.” Jeremiah begged them to do exactly that. But his pleadings fell on deaf ears.

In 586 B.C.—in fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy—King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon brought his armies against the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Shortly before Nebuchadnezzar’s armies breached the walls of Jerusalem, the last king of Judah, Zedekiah, went to Jeremiah and asked, “**Is there any word from the Lord?**” (Jeremiah 37:17). It was the **right** question—but the **wrong** time. It was too late for Judah. The people’s rank refusal to seek God’s counsel, and their dogged determination to ignore His commands, had sealed their fate. Nebuchadnezzar’s armies entered the beloved “City of David,” killed its inhabitants, destroyed the magnificent temple that Solomon had built (and that had stood for almost 400 years!), and carried the remainder of the Israelites away into captivity—where they would remain for the next **seven decades**. Yet the stirring question that King Zedekiah finally was motivated to ask—“**Is there any word from the Lord?**”—still rings in our ears today.

It is that “word from the Lord” about which I want to speak to you today. And to get across the true magnitude of Zedekiah’s question, and the supreme urgency that it should hold for us even in the twenty-

first century, I would like to take your minds back to the Old Testament book of Numbers, where we find the fascinating account of two Bible characters with similar names whose paths unexpectedly crossed under the strangest of circumstances.

Balak was the king of Moab. And he had heard about the things that were happening all around him. Word had spread quickly throughout the region about how, as Exodus 14:26-29 reveals, God had miraculously slaughtered the entire army of Egypt beneath the waters of the Red Sea in order to protect His people. Word also had spread about how, as Numbers 21:26-35 explains, the Israelites had gone into battle against two of Balak's fellow kings—Sihon, ruler of the Amorites, and Og, ruler of Bashan—and had defeated their armies and slain them.

When it came to the fearsome power and overwhelming might of the Israelite nation, King Balak had every right to be genuinely concerned. And he **was** concerned—as is evident from the fact that he screamed at his servants, “People have come out of Egypt who cover the face of the earth—and they are settling **next to me!**” (Numbers 22:5). Because Balak feared that he and his kingdom were about to meet the same fate as the Egyptians, Amorites, and Bashanites, he decided to take an unusual approach to try to preempt an attack by the Israelites. The king called upon a soothsayer from Mesopotamia by the name of Balaam, whom he hoped to bribe into cursing the Israelites so that the army of Moab might be able to defeat them. Numbers 22:6 tells us that Balak's messengers went to Balaam and pleaded on the king's behalf, “Come at once and curse this people for me.”

But in Numbers 22:11 we see God telling Balaam, “You shall **not** go with the king's messengers; nor shall you shall curse the people, for they are blessed.” That **should** have been the end of the matter—but it was not. Some time later, King Balak sent more messengers to Balaam to say, “I will honor you **greatly** and will do **whatever you say**” (Numbers 21:17)—which translates into “I will pay you whatever you ask if you will just come help me!”

God had already told Balaam that he could **not** go to Moab—but then King Balak “upped the ante.” When the king's messengers came to Balaam a second time, he acted as if he was insulted at the fact that they wanted to ask him a second time to return with them to Moab. Balaam even said, “If Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, **I could not go beyond the word of the Lord my God**, to do less or more” (Numbers 22:18). If Balaam had ended the discussion there, everything would have been fine. But he did not. Instead, he said to the messengers, “Stay here tonight so that I may know what more the Lord might say to me” (Numbers 22:19). Thanks to what the inspired writer Jude said many years later in the New Testament about Balaam, we know **why** Balaam acted like he did. Jude said that Balaam “ran greedily for profit” (Jude 11). In other words, Balaam “saw dollar signs,” and decided to ask God a second time if he could go to Moab. When Balam asked God what he should do, the Lord said, “Go with them” (Numbers 22:20).

Does that surprise you? It shouldn't. Let me explain why by giving you a modern-day parallel. The conversation that took place between God and Balaam would be like me going to my mother and asking, "Mom, can I go to the dance on Friday night?" Of course, I knew before I asked that as a Christian I should **never** participate in something sinful that the Bible prohibits and condemns. When my mom said, "No, Blake, you **cannot** go to the dance," that should have been the end of the matter. But suppose I then decided to go back later to ask my mom a second time if I could go to the dance, and she said, "Sure, Blake; go ahead and go." Would my mom **really** be telling me that I was making the **correct** choice by deciding to go to the dance, and that she **approved** of my decision? Of course not! Instead, my mom's answer would be her way of saying to me, "Blake, you know what's right, and you're old enough to make the proper choice. I'm not going to make it for you."

Balaam knew what was right—because, after all, God had **already** told him **not** to go. So, the second time Balaam asked for permission to go to Moab, God said, "Sure, Balaam; go ahead and go"—meaning that Balaam should have used the freedom of choice that God had given him to make the correct choice. Unfortunately, he did not.

Thus, God warned Balaam in no uncertain terms, "**Go, but only the words that I speak to you shall you say!**" (Numbers 22:20). Once Balaam got to Moab, King Balak instructed him on three separate occasions to curse the Israelites. But instead, Balaam **blessed them** three times! Needless to say, this was **not** what Balak wanted to hear. In his wrath, the king yelled out, "I called you to curse my enemies! Instead, you have blessed them three times. Go back home! I had planned to reward you richly, but the Lord has kept you from your reward" (Numbers 24:11).

From this turn of events, we might think that Balaam was the kind of man who was willing to ask, "Is there any word from the Lord?," and who truly wanted to do only what God said. As we later discover, however, that was not at all the case. Numbers 23 and 24 do not provide us with the whole story about Balaam's actions. From Numbers 31:16 we learn that "because of the counsel of Balaam," Balak was successful in enticing the Israelites to commit idolatry and sexual immorality. In fact, in the New Testament we are told about "the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality" (Revelation 2:14). So, instead of Balaam telling King Balak, "I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God," **and meaning what he said**, he "ran greedily after profit"—and ended up providing Balak with a way to defeat God's people.

And how did that turn out for the Israelites and Balaam? After King Balak heeded whatever advice Balaam had given him, Israel committed idolatry at the shrine of the pagan god, Baal. As a result, God commanded that all of the Israelite leaders who had taken part in this insurrection were to be hanged (Numbers 25:4-9). Moses then commanded the judges of Israel, "Every one of you is to kill his men who were joined to Baal." By the time the Sun set that day, **24,000 Israelites lay dead**.

As for Balaam, he never got to spend the bribe that Balak had given him because, as Numbers 31:8 informs us, some time later Balaam sided with Israel's enemies, the Midianites—and in a battle that they fought with Israel, he was slain by the same Israelites whom he earlier had betrayed. Balaam had a golden opportunity to obey God and influence others in a positive way for the Lord. Instead, he “put a stumbling block before the children of Israel” and “ran greedily for profit.”

The thing for which we **should** remember Balaam was his unforgettable statement, “**I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord to do good or bad of my own will**; what the Lord says, that I must speak” (Numbers 24:13). Unfortunately, the thing for which we **do** remember Balaam is the disobedience he exhibited that caused him to go beyond the word of the Lord.

Many years after Balaam's death, the apostle commanded the Christians in Corinth, “**Do not go beyond that which is written**” (1 Corinthians 4:6). The apostle Peter issued a similar command when he wrote, “Whoever speaks must do so **as one speaking the very words of God**” (1 Peter 4:11). God's Word is to be our **only** authority—which explains why, in Romans 4:3, Paul asked the timeless question, “**What does the Scripture say?**”

How different this sermon would have been—and how different the history of Israel would have been—if King Zedekiah, early on in his reign, had asked Jeremiah, “Is there any word from the Lord?,” **and then obeyed God's commands!**

As Jesus was about to perform His very first miracle on Earth at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee, His mother Mary turned to the servants standing nearby and said to them, “**Whatever He says to you, do it.**” Could you **ever** find any better advice than **that**?! Whatever God instructs us to **do**, we **must do**. And whatever **God** has said, **we** must say. This was the very point the Proverbs writer was making when he said, “Do not turn to the right or the left” (Proverbs 4:27). If something is **not** authorized by God's Word, we are not even to **think** about doing it. Conversely, when God's Word provides us with direct commands or approved examples, we are to make **absolutely certain** that we follow them to the letter. When it comes to seeking authority for the things we do in the church, the only way that we can **know** and **do** the will of God is to **read** and **obey** God's Word!

In 2 Peter 1:3 we are told that within God's Word He has given us “all things that pertain unto life **and godliness.**” Psalm 119:89 teaches us that God's Word has already been “settled in heaven.” This is why we cannot add to it or take away from it (Revelation 22:18-19). God's instructions on such things as salvation, church organization, worship, and other soul-saving issues are contained in the Bible—and it alone must serve as our supreme standard in establishing the pattern we are to follow in order to be pleasing to God. This explains why James wrote, “Receive with meekness **the implanted word**, which is able to **save your souls**” (James 1:21). We will **know** we are right when we put God's Word into our hearts and obey His statutes. As Jesus Himself said, “Blessed are those who do God's commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city” (Revelation 22:14).

So what about you? What is your attitude toward God's Word? Are you a Balaam—or a Paul? Are you the kind of person who is willing to ignore God's will? Or are you a person who always wants to know, "What does the Scripture say?" The importance of your answer to those two questions is contained in Christ's statement in John 12:48—"He who does not receive My words has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day" (John 12:48). Nothing trumps the Word of God—**nothing!**