

Numbers 24:10-25

The promises of God persist and point to something eternally good.

Among the biggest letdowns of modern history is FruitStripe Gum. The gum enters the scene with a burst of flavor and that's all you get. Fades as fast as the third chewing motion of your mouth... worthless. But we still loved it for some reason!

Now a whole generation judges chewing gum on its ability to have flavor that lasts.

Things that last are good. To be treasured.

Stacy thinks I have ADHD and it is worked out in my constant need for change. Changing the bags I carry, the pulpits I preach from. The style of clothing I prefer. The random diets I endeavor for three days on average. But I remind her that is the things I stick with that matter most... namely her!

As we have journeyed with Israel through the wilderness there has been an overriding persistence carrying the story and the people to something good. It is that lasting nature we want to hold up before us today.

The promise sticks, is sure, maintains its flavor in the midst of disobedience, fear, pining for slavery over daily provision. And it is thick in the mouths of those given voice by God.

From the oracles of Balaam we can take heart, The Promise of God Persists, and the Promise Points to Something Perfect.

Context: Balaam, the prophet for hire, along with his talking donkey, are being used by God to deliver a message of blessing.

These chapters are unusual, given from the gentile angle of the story. Proves God's promise and proclaims his name in the land.

Faced with war with the fear-inducing numbers of Israel, Balak, King of Moab, pays for cursing but that's not what he gets.

The Promise of God Persists

Before we get to this story, we want to start long ago, in a land not so far from Balaam's home.

With the call of God on another, Abraham, then Abram...

Genesis 12:1–3 “Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. [2] And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. [3] I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (ESV)

The Abrahamic covenant. The note that carries the songs of the Old Testament.

This is the promise to Abraham built upon with a land, being set apart for God's glory.

Throughout it has been tested, by environments, by external threats, by slavery, idolatry, disobedience, and now, by a conjurer, magician, a prophet-for-hire and a king wishing for the demise of Israel.

But it persists.

Balaam, the pagan soothsayer, has Balak build seven altars and sacrifice upon them seven rams, seven bulls, and he will repeat this three times in different places. But each time it is a blessing Israel receives instead of a curse. Balaam can only speak what God tells him.

Numbers 23:5–12 “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 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?” (ESV)

No amount of sacrifice, no amount of desire, effort, or anything else will remove God’s blessing from his people.

And in this story, Balak tries all that he can. He moves Balaam to other high places with different angles to view Israel, thinking if they see a smaller portion of this huge number of people, ‘maybe god will be pleased to curse them.’

But this only leads to word of his own destruction.

The promise persists.

In hindsight, we see it. In ten chapters time this generation will go into the land. They will conquer. They will be set apart for God.

But in the midst of it, and in the midst of our own wilderness journeys, the timing of it makes us anxious.

We, like Balak, try for different angles. Our own effort, our own creativity, behavior... or the energy of created things to get us where we hope to be.

Or, like Abraham, the childless promise receiver, holding onto the promise but taking things into his own hands to produce an heir.

Even for those of us in Christ, believers, saved by grace, lose sight of his provision and take things into our own hands. Our strategy... becoming so busy we miss the blessing.

“Even if we don’t seek out the modern equivalent of pagan divination to seek the solution to our problems, we may still look to created things and people as the ones from whom our blessings will come. Yet this passage demonstrates clearly that the Lord alone has power to bless and curse.”

They let us down.

“They are all ultimately equally impotent to bless or to curse. Some seek their value in money and possessions, but wealth cannot make us genuinely worthwhile as persons, and its absence cannot rob us of our dignity. Others look to power for their validation, but power cannot fulfill us, and its loss cannot make our lives meaningless. Still others invest the approval of people with ultimate significance, but gaining the love of a particular person is not where our value lies, nor will we be destroyed if they are taken from us, however painful that loss may be. None of these created things can make or break us, even though we continually act as if they can.” ID

The blessing of the Lord does not depend on Israel, it is not dependent on us - it is the Lord who makes the promise persist. It’s who he is.

Numbers 23:19–24

“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." (ESV)

He doesn't change his mind. He doesn't lie.

Alan Fadling on the Abrahamic covenant: "Of course I want to be blessed. We all do. But I also truly want to bless others. I want others to receive the good things from me and through me that I've received from a generous Father... Most recently though, I've realized I need to let myself be blessed. I've been resisting God's blessing because I'm focused on whether I deserve it. That's the wrong question. God isn't assessing whether I deserve his generosity. He is simply generous. This is how God treats us. Blessing is rooted in him, not us. God would love nothing more than for you and me to open ourselves fully to all the ways he desires to be generous. Doesn't that sound inviting?"

What Israel has been invited to all along. What we are invited to in Jesus.

It unsettles Balak. Like Satan unable to thwart the plans of the Lord. He begs Balaam to just say nothing.

The promise of God persists. Hold on. Keep clinging to the promises he has given you. He can be trusted.

These stories and more prove it. And ultimately it is the labor of Jesus that has secured the persisting promise for us.

He is here, in Numbers 24.

The Promise Points to Something Perfect

As we read to begin our time together, Balak will have no more, he refuses to pay Balaam and tells him to blame it on God!

“Not only was Balaam not able to curse Israel, he repeatedly blessed them at Balak’s expense! What is more, when Balak finally ran out of patience with Balaam after three failed attempts and tried to send him packing, Balaam proceeded to deliver yet another oracle free of charge, which contained yet another blessing on Israel (24:15-24)!” ID

This brings us to Balaam’s last oracle.

Numbers 24:15–19 “And he took up his discourse and said,

“The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor,
the oracle of the man whose eye is opened,
[16] the oracle of him who hears the words of God,
and knows the knowledge of the Most High,
who sees the vision of the Almighty,
falling down with his eyes uncovered:
[17] I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near:
a star shall come out of Jacob,
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;
it shall crush the forehead of Moab
and break down all the sons of Sheth.
[18] Edom shall be dispossessed;
Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed.
Israel is doing valiantly.
[19] And one from Jacob shall exercise dominion
and destroy the survivors of cities!” (ESV)

Poignant for the moment in history - all these nations that stand against the people of promise will be crushed.

But this vision has a long view. To a star of Jacob...Forefather of the nation of Israel. Israel's king would come from Judah (Gen 49:10), suggesting that this prophecy finds the beginning of its fulfillment in David (cf. 2 Sam 8:2, 14) and its final fulfillment in the One announced by a star in Bethlehem.

"A star will come from Jacob." This prophecy may have some reference to David, but we feel persuaded that the true design of the Holy Spirit is to set forth an emblem of our Lord Jesus Christ. All nature, above as well as around us, sets forth our Lord. All the flowers of the field and many of the beasts of the plain—and now the orbs of heaven—are turned into metaphors and symbols by which the glory of Jesus may be manifested to us. Where God takes such pains to teach, we ought to be at pains to learn." Spurgeon

An oracle fulfilled in Jesus (Rev 5:5; 22:16; see note on Rev 5:5). Jesus the King, who rules over all. (Acts 2:29–36; Phil 2:9–11; Heb 1:3)

Revelation 22:16 "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." (ESV)

Winning victory not by means of war but the sacrifice of his own life, his own blood to provide promise to all who believe.

Hebrews 10:12–14 "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, [13] waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. [14] For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." (ESV)

Philippians 2:9–11 "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, [10] so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, [11] and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (ESV)

A Kingdom blessed to bless others.

As sure as the promised land was - his word rules, remains, and persists for us.

“This final oracle thus spans the entire sweep of human history. Nation after nation will rise to world domination and then fall to defeat. But when the messianic King arrives on the scene, no people other than Israel, the nation set apart, will survive the final day of destruction. At the end of all things, when all of human history has played out its course of changing fortunes, the Lord’s people will be the only ones left standing.” ID

Perfect. Beautiful. Eternally good.

Because it is true - we lean into it. Waiting while we work. Hoping in the midst of the journey. Rejoicing when we glimpses of the promise played out.

And when things seem to lose their flavor, we run back to the word and by His Spirit cling to his promises again.

The world offers less than Fruit Stripe gum as fixes to our deepest longing. Fading, toxic...

Jesus is as an everlasting gobstopper, persisting, perfect, for you.

The promises of God persist and point to something eternally good.

Trust Jesus. Trust his promise, and live.

Numbers 23:19–21

[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. (ESV)