

Exod 03-03-02a

Father, we thank you for the marvelous grace that is expressed toward us, not only in saving us but in constructing for us a plan and a purpose that gives our life meaning, that gives us direction, and we know that through that grace and through that provision we can have the power that belongs to you operative in our lives. We thank you that we are not called to operate in our own strength. You do not rely on our talents or our abilities, but it is more often in our weakness that your strength is made manifest.

We ask your blessing on us this morning as we study together and fellowship in your word. We thank you for the environment in this nation and in this community that allows us to do so. We pray that you will continue to preserve for us the opportunity to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We ask your special blessing on President Bush and on our Congress and our military leadership and on our judiciary that the policies that are set and implemented, the decisions that are made with regard to courses of action, both internationally and domestically, will fall within the realm of your blessing, your approval, and your support. We pray that you will be with all of those who are in harm's way and preserve them, especially for those believers who are far from home and far from their churches, that you will grant them a special measure of your presence and reminder of the resources that are already in their soul through your word and through your spirit to sustain them, to refresh and encourage them, and to comfort them in a time of stress and a time of challenge. Once again, we thank you for the opportunity to fellowship in your word this morning.

We ask your blessing that we might remember and apply it in the days ahead. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

We continue this morning our study of the inception of God's deliverance for the nation of Israel. They have become a nation in the generations they've spent down in Egypt. It doesn't seem like the place to incubate a nation, to take a man with his twelve sons and their families to a place where they dwell and prosper agriculturally and then slowly are co-opted and oppressed into hard bondage.

If I was planning how to build a nation, I wouldn't take the people out of the land I intended to be the nation and enslave them to a greater power. That would not be the normal human logic involved. They're talking about the potential for war in Iraq and for the removal of the government and possibly destroying some of the infrastructure and then afterward, once we've achieved our goal of regime change, to rebuild that nation.

Well, the plan is not to gather up all the Iraqis and transport them out of Iraq and send them over to Iran and make them all slaves for 200 years and then bring them out and have a strong, vibrant, healthy nation. We just don't think in those terms. But it is out of our inabilities, it's in

our lacks and our wants and our weaknesses and all of the things that we don't have where God operates.

That is where we can most clearly see His hand and His strength. It is exceedingly important for us to understand that principle. It's great to look at the Israelites and see that God had to bring them to a place of humility.

It's less easy to look at ourselves and recognize where we are either consciously or unconsciously depending upon our own strength, our own resources. So, for our script reading this morning, I'd like to turn to another example, not too far in the future from the time of Moses, where the same idea is illustrated. And this is in Numbers chapter 22.

Numbers chapter 22. This is the story of Balaam. You will remember that Balak, the king of Moab, became fearful when he saw the Israelites heading in his direction.

You know the origin of the nation of Moab? The Moabites and the Ammonites are descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot by way of incest instigated by his daughters. After Mrs. Lot got turned into a rock, not I-rock, but A-rock, by looking back at the burning city of Sodom, there was a feeling of desperation on the part of the daughters who felt like they would never be able to get married and have children. And they felt like it was all daddy's fault.

Mean old Lot allowed himself to be dragged out of the city and avoid destruction. And now they are sort of unwanted people in the region. Too many questions if they go to a village.

How did you escape? Why were you not destroyed? Did you have anything to do with it? Was it your God that brought about the destruction of our cousins over here in Sodom and Gomorrah? And so they are out there living in a cave. And so the daughters of Lot get him drunk and have their way with him so that they can get pregnant and have sons. And each of them has a son.

One is Moab and the other is Ammon. Well, Balak, many generations after, is the king of the Moabites. He sees these distant relatives, the sons of Jacob, the people of Jacob, heading in his direction and he is afraid that they are going to come and overpower them and take all of their stuff.

And fear incites him to try to find a solution. He doesn't have an army powerful enough to drive them away or to defend against them. So he sends the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian.

If you look closely, you'll notice that the Midianites dwell on the fringes and in the deserts belonging to Moab. That whole Moab and Ammon region is frequented by these nomadic clans and tribes that trace back to Midian who are also distant relatives. They are sons by a different wife of Abraham.

So in verse 4 you'll see that because they were sick with dread because of the children of Israel, Moab said to the elders of Midian, now this company will lick up everything around us as an ox

licks up the grass of the field. If you've seen any of these modern archaeological reconstructions of what happened with the exodus, you will notice that there is a lot of speculation that there wasn't a great mass exodus of Israelites, that there was just a small trickle of people who gradually migrated over to the land of Canaan. Well, if there was just small little groups gradually migrating over to the promised land, then why are the Moabites and the Midianites sick with dread? Do we get sick with dread over just a few little people trickling across? This is a huge mighty horde and they say, look, they're going to lick up everything around us.

They're going to make it impossible. There will be no crops, there will be no animals, there won't be anything to eat. They're going to wreck our economy.

So in Numbers 22 verse 4, the Moabites go to the elders of Midian and they say, look, we've got to pool our resources and come up with something here. So they say they're going to lick up everything around us as an ox licks up the grass of the field. So Balak, the son of Zippor, was king of the Moabites at that time.

Numbers 22.5, then he sent messengers to Balaam, the son of Baor, at Pthor. This is his little village where he lives. And this is near the river in the land of the sons of his people, to call him saying, look, a people has come from Egypt.

See, they cover the face of the earth and are settling next to me. So this is sort of like a locust invasion. If you ever read the Little House books and you remember Laura talking about the locusts that came and carpeted the ground and ate everything in sight so that there were nothing but dry branches and twigs left.

They ate every leaf, they ate every stem, they consumed every blade of grass and just wiped it clean. And he says this is what they're like. So please come at once, curse this people for me, for they are too mighty for me.

He says, I don't have the army to drive off these Israelites. There are too many of them. So I'm going to use magic.

We're going to magically make them go away. We're going to use a higher power, a spiritual power. Come at once and curse this people.

They are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed and he whom you curse is cursed.

Now why is this? The reason is that Balaam is a prophet of God. He doesn't have demon power. He's not some kind of a mystical, spooky kind of a Baal worshipper.

He is a prophet of the God of Israel. But he doesn't live down in the land. If we had time, I could take you to passages that demonstrate that in the first few generations after Jacob and his sons went down to the land, they traveled back up to the land of Canaan in sort of a temporary

fashion.

Their homesteads and their permanent dwellings and their industry was all located down in Goshen. But they didn't just stop crossing the border. Once the famine eased up after the seven years of hard times there, why, they began to do business again.

They had lots of contacts, buyers and sellers up in Canaan. So their home base shifted to Goshen, but there was a lot of trade and traffic back up to the land. Well, some of the people wound up sticking around up there.

Some of them got killed up there. There's a notice over in Chronicles about some of them that were murdered during a business transaction up there. This is the time of Job, in my opinion.

I think the story of Job takes place between the time of Joseph and the time of Moses. So Balaam is one of the leftovers from this travel back and forth from Egypt by the Israelites. He is a prophet of God.

He can curse and people are cursed. He can bless and people are blessed. He has a connection with the Lord God of Israel.

So the people know this and they say, we're going to hire you. We want you to come and put a blight on this people, weaken them enough that we can defeat them and drive them out. Does that make sense? If we had, let's say, the Canadians decided that they're just sick of the weather up there in Manitoba and Saskatchewan and they want to come down here and take over Southern California and Florida and Texas, the land of promise, why they're just going to mass their mighty hordes and come over and take our land and we've got half our army in the Middle East and the other half over trying to fix Korea and we don't have any way to defend ourselves.

The National Guard is too thinly spread. So this would be the equivalent of going to Billy Graham and saying, Billy Graham, we need you to talk to God. We know you have influence in high places.

We want you to try to get God to act on our behalf and weaken these people so they can't come take our land. This is sort of a modern fairy tale of what would be going on. So the elders of Moab, the elders of Midian departed.

This is 22-7 of numbers. With the diviner's fee in their hand. He doesn't do this as a kindness or as a charity.

He's not running a non-profit organization. He gets paid. He makes merchandise out of this gift.

So they have the diviner's fee in their hand. This is a lot of cash, basically. They came to Balaam and they spoke to him the words of Balak.

He said to them, lodge here tonight and I will bring back word to you as the Lord speaks to me.

So the princes of Moab stayed with Balaam. And notice Balaam is careful.

He has had experience doing this kind of thing before. He doesn't say, no problem, I'll curse them. Let me just check and see how much you've got laid down on the camels out there.

That looks like enough. You can imagine that this sort of service would command a very handsome fee. I would think in modern dollars this would be up in the six figures, maybe more.

A lot of money to deliver a nation. But he doesn't say he'll do it. He says, stay here overnight.

A lot of times in the Old Testament you find that God communicates with prophets and with men of God with whom he wants to communicate at night in dreams and visions. And this is evidently the case. He doesn't say, well, you all sit down here and have a cup of water while I go in the back room and talk to God.

He says, I've got to talk to him tonight. So lodge here tonight. I'll get into my vision mode and communicate with God and I'll let you know my answer in the morning.

Because Balaam also knows that he can't just go out there and make something up. It won't work unless God says he's going to do it. So the princes of Moab stayed with Balaam and in verse 9, God came to Balaam and said, who are these men with you? How many times do we see God in the Bible begin a conversation with a question like this? Adam in the garden, why are you where you are? Have you eaten of the tree? Well, God knows good and well everything that's taking place.

God knows who these men are, but he's asking Balaam. And there is a point of application with regard to prayer. When we go to God in prayer, sometimes we're tempted to think, well, why pray to God? Because he knows everything, right? He knew what was going to happen today, yesterday.

So why should I pray? Well, look at the way God prompts us to tell him our understanding of a situation. So he asks Balaam, who are these men with you? And Balaam has to respond. And picture this now.

Here is a man, a little puny man, Balaam, explaining to God what's going on, as if God doesn't know. Isn't that kind of how we feel sometimes when we pray? It is essential in the same way that when my children were very small and I would walk into their room, I would hear some loud thump and breaking glass or whatever, and go into the room, what's the first thing I do? I say, what's going on in here? Well, I can see what's going on. They've been roughhousing.

They've knocked something over. Something broke. There were rules violated.

There were policies breached. I know exactly what happened. But I ask the question, why? Because I want them to go through the mental process of, oh, this is how we fouled up.

This was our thought process. And now that you're standing here, I can see that in the cold

light of day, that wasn't the smartest thing to do. But it is for their benefit, right? I'm not asking the question because I want to know.

I already know. I'm asking the question to try to get their tiny minds to work and to follow a course of logic, to make a teaching point so that in the future they can make better choices and avoid breaking things. So God says, who are these men with you? So Balaam said to God, Balak, the son of Zipporah, king of Moab, has sent to me, saying, look, a people has come out of Egypt, and they cover the face of the earth.

Come now, curse them for me. Perhaps I shall be able to overpower them and drive them out. God said to Balaam, you shall not go with them.

You shall not curse the people. They are blessed. So Balaam rose in the morning and said to the princes of Balak, go back to your land, for the Lord has refused to give me permission to go with you.

Everything is great up to this point. Balaam has done everything right, hasn't he? Told them to wait, checked with God, God said no, told them in the morning, God says no. Can't do it.

The Lord has refused to give me permission to go with you. The one thing he left out is he did not tell them God says they are blessed. He just says God won't let me go with you.

Now, this is the first place where Balaam has started to kind of bend the procedure a little bit. He did not tell them exactly what God said. If he had told them that God says they are blessed, well, that pretty well shuts the door and nails it.

But he doesn't. He just says, well, I don't have permission to go with you. Kind of like, well, if I did have permission to go with you, why, the cursing thing would be no big deal.

I'm just not allowed to leave. So he shades the truth and he leaves out some important information here. So the princes of Moab make the trip all the way back to Balaam and they say Balaam refuses to come with us.

Of course, Balaam doesn't get the word that the God of Balaam says these people are blessed and you're wasting your time. So Balaam sent princes again, more numerous and more honorable than the first ones. First time he sent like the undersecretary of education or something.

This time he sends the secretary of state. Gets a higher powered guy with fancier robes and more chains and staffs and servants and things. So they came to Balaam and they said, thus says Balak, the son of Zippor, please let nothing hinder you from coming to me.

Verse 17, I will certainly honor you greatly. I will do whatever you say to me. This is like doubling and tripling the fee.

Therefore, please come curse this people for me. Balaam answered and said to the servants of

Balak, even though 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. Now, therefore, please you also stay here tonight that I may know what more the Lord will say to me.

Now, the Lord already made a pronouncement here, didn't he? Have you ever had your children come and say, you know, we really want to do this and so. No, sorry, I can't do that. So then like five minutes go by and then they come or they go to the other parent.

Well, you know, can we please, you know, do this and so. Well, the answer has been given that ought to end it, but it doesn't. And again, Balaam is very sorely tempted.

He looks out at the camels, he sees the gold, he sees the carpeting and the new tent that they've got packed there. They have a nice big grand tent, probably offering him some slaves, anything that he wants. He's thinking, well, you know, maybe I misunderstood.

Maybe God didn't really understand the full weight of the question. So stay overnight. Verse 20, God came to Balaam at night and said to him, if the men come to call you, rise and go with them.

But only the word which I speak to you that you shall do. Now, this is a little bit of a surprise. You wonder why God just doesn't say, didn't you hear me the first time? I said, no.

He says, look, since you didn't tell them that I have blessed them, I'm going to have to send you there to say that in person. So at first, it seems like God is yielding. But what God is actually doing is, it's sort of like, again, you know, you think of children all the time.

God deals with us as a father and we are children. Somebody says, oh, please let me skate down the street on these inline skates. You say, no, I don't want you to skate down the street in inline skates.

You haven't figured them out yet. You won't be able to steer. You might get hit by a car.

You might run into something. Oh, please, please let me. Okay, fine.

And you change your mind because you're going to make a point that after they're out there and they can't steer and they run into things and knock people's rearview mirrors off their cars and stuff that, see, now this is what I was telling you, this is a bad idea. So since you won't take what I'm saying verbally, I'm going to seem to accede to your request. And I'm going to make my point in a more powerful way.

That's what God is doing here. He says, look, I'm not going to curse these people. They are blessed.

Balaam says, oh, please, Lord, let me go. He says, all right, I'll let you go. But you only say what I tell you to say, because I'm going to put you over there and you're going to get to tell Balak face to face, these people are blessed since you won't tell the princes.

He didn't tell the first set. He hasn't told the second set that they are blessed. So this is what God tells him at night.

So in verse 21, Balaam rose in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. Now, put yourself in Balaam's position. You look out the tent flap, camel after camel after camel, gold, jewels and gems just spilling out of sacks, grain, animals, all these wonderful things, and the promise of even more from Balak.

And God has given permission. And so Balaam is saying, this is great. Let's see, where will I expand? How will I build on? I'm going to get that new color TV with a built in DVD and a widescreen digital satellite tuner.

And he's thinking of all the things that he's going to get because God has acquiesced and let's and letting him go. And he's looking at the loot. So his motivation, he was doing so well at the beginning.

I can only do what God lets me do. I can only say what God lets me say. But now he's been co-opted by this big pile of loot.

So he rose in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. Verse 22, then God's anger was aroused because he went. Now, isn't this confusing? God just told him, when they ask you to go in the morning, get up and go with them.

Only the word which I speak to you that shall you do. Well, you notice in verse 21, God told Balaam, if the men come to call you, rise and go with them. Is there any coming and calling in verse 21? Balaam's like, hey guys, wake up.

And he's already sitting on the donkey. You know, he's ready to go. He didn't follow God's instructions.

God said, if the men rise and call you, go with them. Only the word which I speak that you shall do. Well, God just got through speaking, saying, wait for them to call.

He didn't wait for them to call. He rose up early in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. So God's anger is aroused because he went.

His procedure is wrong and his motivation is wrong. God does ultimately want him to go, but not for this reason. So the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as an adversary against him.

Now note this, because this is the point of contact with our passage. God's anger was kindled. The word rendered aroused here is literally the word kindled.

And this has the idea of lighting something on fire. God was inflamed against Balaam because he went. So the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as an adversary against him.

This is a reminder of the fact that it is not what we do. It is why we do it that God judges. Balaam is in a sense doing what God told him to do, right? He said, go with the princes.

He's going with the princes. But now the angel of the Lord is standing as an adversary against him because of how he is going and why he is going. Moses will commit this same mistake later in the desert when the people run out of water.

God says, speak to the rock. And so he speaks to the rock. Actually, the first time he says, strike the rock.

He strikes the rock and water comes forth. The second time they run out of water, God says, speak to the rock. And Moses stands up and swaggers to the front of the assembly and he says, must we bring water forth from you from this rock? And he turns around and he whacks it with the staff a second time instead of speaking to it.

Does God want the people to have water? Does he want the water to come forth from the rock? Absolutely. But does he want Moses up there? Must we, me, Moses and Aaron bring forth water from this rock? He's doing it in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons. It's like, I'm the great water giver.

I'm the God of water here. And all I have to do is do the same thing I did last time and water will come forth. And so God, God's anger was kindled against Moses on that occasion.

And Moses does not get to go into the land of Canaan because of that one incident. Here, Balaam is going. It's what God wants, but he's not doing it the right way.

He's riding on his donkey, two servants with him. Now the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand. So the donkey turned aside out of the way and went into the field.

Now this is sort of a rebuke to Balaam because a donkey can see better than Balaam can. The donkey symbolically here sees the angel of the Lord. He's not, he's a dumb animal, but he knows not to continue down that way.

Balaam is blind to the presence of the Lord. And this is what happens to us when we have our motives change. When we're still doing the right thing, but we're doing it for some other reason, it blinds us to the presence of the Lord.

We can't see God's guidance anymore and we are bound for discipline. So the donkey wisely turns aside out of the way and goes into the field. So Balaam struck the donkey to turn her back onto the road.

Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards. At first there was a field, stopped him the first time. Well, he takes a detour around, beats the donkey, gets it back up on the road, keeps going.

So the angel has moved now and there are vineyards and there are these like stone walls on each side to keep varmints out of the vineyards from eating the grapes and so on. And so he's standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand between the vineyards with a wall on this side and a wall on that side. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she pushed herself against the wall and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall.

So he struck her again. Then the angel of the Lord went further. They get a little further down where there was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left.

And when the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she laid down under Balaam, just collapsed in the road. There is no place to turn. So Balaam's anger was kindled and he struck the donkey with his staff.

Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey and she said to Balaam, what have I done to you that you have struck me these three times? And the next verse says Balaam fainted dead away at hearing a donkey speak, right? Balaam is so angry that he takes no note of the fact that his donkey has suddenly gained the ability to speak. Balaam answers the donkey, engages it in conversation. And it's a reminder of how insensitive and illogical we can get when our hearts are not pure before God.

When we start to operate out of greed or out of selfishness, out of bitterness, out of anger, especially anger. Anger, when we get incensed about something, we lose our ability to reason. We lose our ability to observe.

And we certainly lose our ability to perceive the presence and the guidance of God. And that's what has happened to poor Balaam here. So when the donkey says, what have I done to you? Balaam says to the donkey, because you have abused me.

I wish there was a sword in my hand. For now I would kill you. He's got the world's first talking donkey and all he can think of is how to kill it.

It's just astonishing. So the donkey replies and says, am I not your donkey on which you have ridden ever since I became yours to this day? Was I ever disposed to do this to you? So now the donkey is questioning Balaam, interrogating him, trying to calm him down and get him to think. Now, when have I ever acted this way before? Do you not think there might be a reason for this? If you suddenly encounter resistance where there has never been any before, when you suddenly encounter difficulty where there never has been any before, it's a wake-up call.

You're supposed to stop and think. Now, maybe there's something I need to reflect on here. Maybe I need to reconsider my action and my policy because something strange is taking place, something that seems to be from God.

Talking donkeys don't just occur as an aberration or a mutation from evolution. So Balaam answers and he says, no, you've never done this before. 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.

He bowed his head and fell flat on his face. The angel of the Lord said to him, the donkey is relieved of any further speaking duties now. Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to stand against you because your way is perverse before me.

Your way is perverse before me. You are doing the right thing, but you are not doing it in the right way. It is Balaam's heart that is not right before God.

The donkey saw me and turned aside from me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely I would also have killed you by now and let her live. Balaam says, I'll kill the donkey.

God says, no, I'll kill you and the donkey will live. Well, this gets Balaam's attention. You would think an angel with a flaming sword would help straighten you out.

So, Balaam says, I have sinned, for I did not know you stood in the way against me. Now, therefore, if it displeases you, I will turn back. This is something I'm doing in the wrong way.

The angel of the Lord said to Balaam, go with the men, but only the word that I speak to you, that you shall speak. So, Balaam went with the princes of Balak. Well, we go on from there, and he's going to go, and three times, in the same way that he had these three failures, three is such a significant number in the word of God.

These three times, the angel of the Lord stands in his way. Three times, Balaam is going to stand and look down on Israel and bless them instead of cursing, because that is God's purpose, and there are some tremendous statements in that prophecy that go all the way forward and will ultimately guide the wise men to the birthplace of the Lord Jesus. Words that Balaam spoke on that occasion are going to have repercussions down through the centuries, but it has to be done in the power of God.

If we do things in our own strength, we can be doing what seems right to us, but the ends thereof are the ways of death. Well, let's return now to Exodus chapter 4, where we are going to see a very similar episode. God has appeared to Moses in the burning bush.

Moses took off his sandals. He has told him, what's up? You're being called. You're going to go, and I'm going to use you to speak to Pharaoh.

Let my people go. He's had the signs at the beginning of the chapter. Do you remember what the signs were? What were the three signs? He throws down the rod, turns into a serpent, grabs the serpent, and it becomes a rod again.

It's a reminder. What does a rod or a staff symbolize? It symbolizes leadership and authority. If you have the staff, in modern days they would say, you the man.

You're the one that's standing up in front, leading. This is authority, and God says, you've got to cast off human authority and human means of persuasion. Isn't that what authority really is? A

means of persuasion? I'm the boss.

I tell you to do something, and you do it, because I am persuasive. I sign your paycheck, or I'm the head of the household, or I'm the military authority holding the rank, and these oak leaves outrank your butter bars, so when I tell you something, you do it. It's an effective means of persuasion.

God says, cast down the rod that you have in your hand. That's his shepherd's staff, and God supernaturally changes that staff into something else, into a serpent. It's fearful.

It intimidates him. When he picks it back up, now this staff will be called the rod of God from now on. It is the staff of God.

What was the second sign? He puts his hand in, and it becomes leprous. He puts it back out, and it becomes clean. His hand is the symbol of his own strength.

The hand is the symbol of strength. He puts his hand in, and God says, your strength is the strength of death. Leprosy is a living death.

Only God has the power to take what was dead and make it alive. In Hebrews chapter 6, not laying again the foundation of change of mind away from dead works and of faith toward God. Doing what we do in faith transforms it from a leprous hand into a hand that can do things for God.

Not by might, not by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts. It isn't that we do things that much different. People think, oh, if I become a Christian, I'm going to have to go evangelize and hand out tracts and become a missionary and go to Botswana or Afghanistan or somewhere, and I'm going to have to totally change and do all of these different things that I've never done before and that don't appeal to me.

Ninety-nine percent of the time, we continue our life doing the same things that we have done before, after we're saved. The difference is, we walk by faith and not by sight. We do the same job.