

97-12-21b

Okay, we are back now from our break and we're wanting to summarize, to some extent at least, the things that we've seen in Genesis chapter 1 through 3. The story in Genesis is going to begin to move quite rapidly from this point forward, beginning with Cain and Abel in Genesis chapter 4, and moving on to the descendants, you get into Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and then on into the story of Abraham. We've got some very exciting things coming up, and by comparison, the stable and placid atmosphere in the Garden of Eden, and then even the sin of Adam and Eve, you don't have thunder and lightning and the earth opening and a lot of grandiose things taking place. But before we get into the dust and smoke and confusion of the rest of Genesis, we want to be sure that we have gotten a grip on the things that God has built into this introduction, because as we have seen, Genesis is an introduction not only to the Pentateuch and to the story of Israel, but to the Bible as a whole.

And so we've already seen, and I'll just review quickly, these points of summary. First, God is the originator of all things. He dwells beyond them and outside of them, but also in the midst of them, and that is the nature of our life as believers.

God has a plan that surrounds us. It's a plan for human history, a plan that involves the angels, that stretches into the eternal past and the eternal future, and He is transcendent. He is way beyond all of these things and is in absolute control of them, and yet that same God has expressed a desire to dwell within us and to have fellowship with us.

And it's an awesome thing when you think of how puny we are in comparison to the eternal things of God, and yet the God of the essence box is also a God of compassion who, for a reason that frankly still escapes me, desires relationship with me and with all of us. And the privilege of having the indwelling presence of God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, all three of which Jesus talks about in His upper room discourse in John 14, 15, and 16, is an awesome thing, and it is a goal to be pursued and to be sought after. And we've seen the means for that.

It's a wonderful thing to see how things go, or to see what is possible, but we also want to know how to get there. And Proverbs chapter 2 is one of the central passages in explaining that. Secondly, God culminates the creation of the material universe by making man in His image and after His likeness, and that implies a responsibility.

We stand at the center of God's creation in the material universe. We are physical embodiments of certain aspects of God's image and likeness. Thirdly, God makes a place of communion with Himself for man to inhabit.

We're going to explore that a little more fully here momentarily. But the Garden of Eden is not the throne room of God, but it is the place where God and man meet and share

fellowship. Fourth, life in the Garden involves activity, fellowship, service, purpose.

And human history will end as it began. We will be in that place of communion, the new heavens and the new earth ultimately coexisting with Almighty God, and we will continue to be involved in activity, service, fellowship, purpose. And this life is preparation for that goal in many ways.

Fifth, with the fall comes separation from God, separation from the source and sustainer of life. And that's pictured in the expulsion from the Garden. It's pictured in the denial of access to the Tree of Life.

And yet, God has made a way of return, not in the physical sense until we enter the Kingdom of God in the eternal future, but in the spiritual sense we have a preview and an opportunity in the realm of ultimate reality, the world of the Spirit, to once again be restored and to get over that separation from God and from the source and sustainer of life. Sixth, our relationships have been changed, the nature of them and the means of experiencing them has been changed as a result of the fall. Instead of having these things as a given and as something we take for granted, now to enjoy the blessing that God designed in relationship with Himself, relationship of the wife to the husband, mothers to children, men and their vocation and the fulfillment of their jobs and so forth.

These now present us with good and evil. And good is something that must be pursued. It's not something that is built in as an automatic thing.

It is easy for these to be the source of evil, to be the source of sorrow and pain. With the knowledge of good and evil comes the taint and the choice between those things in all of the most important areas of our life. Seventh is the consequence of six, blessing and fellowship.

Those good things are no longer things we can take for granted. There is a way to those things that God has made and we have to choose that way. And if we don't know that way, if we don't choose that way, we are doomed to the results of the knowledge of evil.

Number eight, the garden as a place of residence in the presence of God is off limits. And if you look at Genesis chapter 3, the portion that we now look at in detail begins in verse 22. The Lord God said, Behold, the man has become like one of us to know good and evil.

And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat and live forever, therefore the Lord God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. So he drove out the man and he placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden and a flaming sword was turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. This means to deny access, to prevent re-entering the garden, to prevent access to the tree of life.

So the garden as a place of residence in the presence of God is now off limits. But God has made a way. And if you think about some of the characteristic elements in the description of the garden of Eden, this place of fellowship and dwelling with God, you have gold and precious stones, you have the presence here of the cherubim, you have the water, the trees, and all of these things that represent the presence of God and fellowship with God.

These are now going to be echoed when you get to the law of Moses and the design of the tabernacle. What is the other name for the tabernacle? What is its common name in Exodus and forward? It's called the tent of meeting, isn't it? It's not a place where man comes and dwells. The Israelites don't live inside a giant tent.

The camp of Israel is not called the dwelling place of God, but the tabernacle is the place of meeting. And there is a way to once again stand in the presence of God, to meet and enjoy fellowship with God, and it's the tent of meeting. And many of the accoutrements in that tabernacle and later the temple hark back to things that we've seen in the description of the garden of Eden.

So, for example, you have the golden candlestick in the holy place. What is the shape of the golden candlestick? Well, if you look at the description of it in Exodus, it is shaped like a tree, a seven-branched tree. And the light, the flame, the oil that enables it to remain lit and a source of illumination, it pictures life.

It is a reminder of the tree of life that grows and stands in the presence of God. You have the showbread that sits on the table in the holy place, which is a source of sustenance. And it stands in contrast to the fruit that was the diet of man, and now he will go out into the soil and earn his bread by the sweat of his brow.

And it's a reminder that God has made a way of sustenance. It's not the perfect way. It's not the original way.

But it is a way that enables God to express his character and his love for us in a new and different way. You have the cherubim. You might look at Exodus chapter 26, verse 31, talking about the veil that separated the holy place from the holy of holies where the ark of the covenant and the actual throne of God or presence of God was pictured or symbolized and was in reality for a long time in Israel.

You shall make a veil. This is Exodus 26, verse 31. You shall make a veil woven of blue, purple and scarlet thread, fine woven linen.

It shall be woven with an artistic design of cherubim. What is it that guards the way to the presence of God? Cherubim. Hanging upon the four pillars of acacia wood overlaid with gold.

Their hooks are gold upon four sockets of silver and so forth. Verse 34, put the mercy

seat upon the ark of the testimony and the most holy. You shall set the table outside the veil and the lampstand across from the table on the side of the tabernacle toward the south and put the table on the north side.

And so these elements that all hark back to the days of the garden and the expulsion from the garden are there. You can find this same description in 1 Kings 6 and verse 29 with regard to the temple. 1 Kings 6, verse 29, talking about Solomon working on the inside of the temple.

He carved all the walls of the temple all around, both the inner and outer sanctuaries with carved figures of cherubim, palm trees and open flowers. The floor of the temple he overlaid with gold, both the inner and outer sanctuaries and so forth. But even in the walls are carved the images of the cherubim.

The ark of the covenant itself, you remember the cherubim that sit on the mercy seat, whose wings cover the mercy seat in Exodus 25, verses 18-22, which again guard the holiness of God, guard the presence of God. Exodus 25-18, you shall make two cherubim of gold, of hammered work you shall make them at the two ends of the mercy seat. One cherub at one end, the other cherub at the other end.

Make the cherubim at the two ends of it as one piece with the mercy seat. They'll stretch out their wings above, covering the mercy seat with their wings and they shall face one another. The faces of the cherubim shall be toward the mercy seat.

Put the mercy seat on top of the ark and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I will give you. And there I will meet with you and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the testimony about everything which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel. So the cherubim are the guardians of the presence of God and once again they're being stationed at the east of the garden, which is the entrance, is a reminder to us that the garden was the place of the presence of God and we're no longer qualified because of sin, because of the knowledge of good and evil, we're no longer qualified to take for granted the opportunity to march into the presence of God and to walk with Him.

And again in 1 Kings 6, verses 23-28, you have the temple equivalent of what was in the tabernacle. Inside the inner sanctuary two cherubim of olive wood, each ten cubits high. One wing of each cherub was five cubits, the other wing five cubits, ten cubits from the tip of one wing to the tip of the other.

And they're both the same size. He, in verse 27, set the cherubim inside the inner room and they stretched out the wings of the cherubim so that the wing of the one touched one wall and the wing of the other cherub touched the other wall. The wings touched each other in the middle of the room.

He overlaid the cherubim with gold and so forth. So they are reminders. They send us back to the days of the garden.

Now, as I mentioned toward the end of our first session, there are elements here in these first three chapters that are archetypical. They are the first instance. They show for us the presence of God, the holiness of God, the plan of God for man, what man's function is in perfection and in the presence of God, and also the nature of his life as he is driven forth.

And the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the consequences of partaking of it are now characteristic of human history and therefore characteristic of our individual lives. What exactly does that mean for us? Well, let me ask you a question. Here's a little quiz, a little mental challenge.

These elements that we have seen here in Genesis chapter 2 and chapter 3, you have toward the close of chapter 3 now the angels, the cherubim, stationed at the east of the garden just as you have the east gate of Jerusalem and the east-facing entrance of the temple itself. You have what is it that guards the way back to the tree of life? It's this flaming sword that whirls in every direction. You have the curse pronounced by God, a threefold statement of the consequences of partaking that involves cursing there.

You have the serpent in the garden, a talking animal which is highly unusual. You have life and death hanging in the balance. The way of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is a way of death, and you have that discussion between Eve and the serpent on whether or not death is involved.

You have after the Lord returns in the cool breeze of the day, you have the confession of sin on the part of Adam and Eve. And you have God taking this event which is fraught with death and with cursing and with loss and turning it to blessing and pronouncing and foretelling salvation even in the midst of it. All of these elements that I have just mentioned, the angel of the Lord, the sword, the curse, a talking animal, death in the balance, confession of sin, sin and cursing turned to blessing, the serpent, all of these elements, every single one of them occur in another passage of Scripture in the Old Testament.

So this is your quiz. Can you think of another place in Scripture? In fact, the clue should be the talking animal because there's only one other place in Scripture where you have a talking animal, Balaam and his donkey, we'll say. Balaam and the donkey.

Now, what on earth would that story have to do with what we have just seen in the first three chapters of Genesis? Well, let's turn there and find out. This is in Numbers chapter 22. The more you look at this, the more amazing it is, the correspondence of this passage of Scripture.

At first it seems like a complete non-sequitur, but as you begin to look at it, all of these elements that I have mentioned are found here and they are there by design. A lot of us today use and study from cross-reference Bibles, don't we? We like the Thompson chain reference or the Schofield with its cross-references. One of my favorite tools in Bible study is the New Treasury of Scripture Knowledge, a book which I highly recommend.

If you do not have one, get one. The New Treasury of Scripture Knowledge. There is an Old Treasury of Scripture Knowledge, which is good.

The New is even better and more comprehensive. But it is essentially a book of cross-references. You go to any passage of Scripture and every significant thing that is mentioned in a verse, there are cross-references.

It is better than a concordance because a lot of these cross-references don't necessarily share a vocabulary, but there is a concept or a topic or an idea that is shared. The NTSK, as we fondly refer to it, is a terrific Bible study resource. I do not prepare a lesson without it.

But the Scriptures in their original form did not have those aids present within them. Moses did not write a cross-reference copy of the Torah, at least not at first glance. But if you begin to look, the way that the Bible cross-references itself is in this way.

You begin to find common vocabulary or common themes or an idea or a subject or a topic or a symbol that harks back. This is the next place in Scripture where a serpent occurs after Genesis chapter 2. The next place where you have a serpent coming to prominence is here in Numbers chapter 21. You will remember that in Numbers 21.5 the people spoke against God and against Moses.

Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There's no food and no water. And our soul loathes this worthless bread. The bread, the means of sustenance in the fallen world that God ordained for Adam when he leaves the garden.

We don't like it. We don't want it. This bread is worthless.

And this is the supernatural bread. This is the bread of angels, it's called in one place. The manna that God provides.

It's the supernatural bread from heaven. And they say our soul loathes this worthless bread. These are people who have come from Egypt who have been redeemed by the blood of the Passover lamb.

But they make a choice. So what does God do? He says if you're going to choose the way of evil, I will let you experience the way of evil. And in verse 6, the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people.

And many of the people of Israel died. So the people came to Moses and what did they do? They did the same thing that Adam did in the garden and that Eve did in the garden. We have sinned.

They acknowledged their sin. They confessed their sin. We have spoken against the Lord and against you.

Pray to the Lord that he take away the serpents from us. Moses prayed for the people. The Lord said to Moses, make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole.

And it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live. God doesn't just eradicate the plague. He puts a condition of faith.

He puts a condition of acknowledging. Someone to look at the serpent is to acknowledge the presence of evil, to acknowledge participation in evil. And it implies faith.

It implies obedience. You have to not only obey by looking at the serpent, but you have to believe that God will do what he says he will do. He says if you look at it, you will live.

Do they believe that or not? Oh, how can looking at something cause me to live? I'm not even going to bother. I don't want to drag my snake bit leg across the camp to go look at this serpent on a pole. Moses made a bronze serpent in verse 9. He put it on a pole.

So it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived. What does looking at the serpent, why wasn't it a cross or a slain lamb or something that they look at? You would think Christ was lifted up and men looked to him for salvation. Why is it that it's the serpent that's lifted up? This is a symbol of confession.

This is a symbol of acknowledgement. Yes, I have brought this on myself. I chose against God.

I spoke against Moses. I spoke against the bread. I said my soul loathes this worthless bread.

And it is a recognition of evil. It is a recognition of sin and an acknowledgement. And at the same time, it's an act of faith.

Believing that in the same way that Naaman had to go to the Jordan and dip himself seven times. At first he thought it was ridiculous, but he went and did it. And when he obeyed and expressed his faith in that obedience, his leprosy was cured.

In the same way, the plague of serpents and the fatal consequences of being bitten are removed. So here you have the serpent. Well, what's in the next chapter? Look at the heading in your Bible for chapter 22 of Numbers.

You have the story of Balaam. The children of Israel camped in the plains of Moab on the

side of the Jordan across from Jericho. There is a lot I could say about the eastward orientation of their position relative to Jerusalem and the Jordan and so forth.

But look at verse 2. Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites and Moab was exceedingly afraid of the people because there were many. Moab was 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.

And Balak the son of Zippor was king of the Moabites at the time. So he sent messengers. And by the way, verse 4, you have the Midianites and the Moabites joining forces here to try to stop Israel and to oppose Israel.

And we will see that this is a two pronged attack. This is the Moabites part. Balak the king of the Moabites here, he sends messengers to Balaam in verse 5, the son of Baor at Pethor which is near the river in the land of the son of his people to call him saying, look a people has come from Egypt.

See they cover the face of the earth and they are settling next to me. A people has come from Egypt. These are the redeemed and they cover the face of the earth.

It reminds us of what God told Adam and Eve, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. They are settling next to me therefore please come at once. Curse this people for me for 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. So now you have the introduction of the idea of a curse.

God pronounces the consequences in the garden, blessing and cursing. The elders of Moab and the elders of Midian depart with their diviner's fee in their hand and they came to Balaam and spoke to him the words of Balak. Notice Moab and Midian are both involved in this endeavor.

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. Now Balaam is a true prophet.

Balaam has a relationship with Almighty God. He is not like the witch of Endor who gets surprised when the real God acts and when the real prophet Samuel shows up. She was startled and nearly fainted dead away when instead of the demonic things that she was used to the genuine Samuel rose from the dead.

This is not the case with Balaam. Balaam is a believer. Balaam has a relationship with the true God and he says I will consult with God and I will get back to you.

And God came to Balaam, this is the real God in verse 9 and said who are these men

with you? Reminds us of the question that God asks in the garden. Do you think God knows who these men are? Of course he does. But he is asking Balaam.

Balaam ought already to know the answer to this but these men have come with the diviner's fee. They come with a lot of money and with a lot of prestige. So Balaam says well I'm going to go back and consult with God.

Maybe there is some kind of a way that I can come with you. So God says who are these men with you? And really the answer to that question is the answer to Balaam's question as to whether or not he should go with them to curse Israel. Balaam knows who Israel is.

He knows that they are the people of God. He has a relationship with God and he is a prophet of God. So Balaam said to God this is Balak the son of Zipporah king of Moab has sent to me saying look a people has come out of Egypt.

They covered the face of the earth. Come now curse them for me. Perhaps I shall be able to overpower them and drive them out.

So God says to Balaam in verse 12 of Numbers 22, you shall not go with them. You shall not curse the people for they are blessed. End of story.

End of discussion. There is no doubt. There is no room for quibbling here.

So Balaam rose in the morning and he does the right thing. He says to the princes of Balak go back to your land. The Lord has refused to give me permission to go with you.

The princes of Moab rose went to Balaak and said Balaam refuses to come with us. Balaak again sent princes more numerous and more honorable than they. And they came to Balaam and said to him thus says Balaak the son of Zipporah please let nothing hinder you from coming to me for I will certainly honor you greatly and I will do whatever you say to me.

Therefore please come curse this people for me. Balaam answered and said look I already gave you the answer God gave me the first time. Is that what he says? No.

He says to the servants of Balaak though Balaak 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 stay here tonight that I may know what more the Lord God will say to me. And this is the beginning of Balaam's error.

The overwhelming pull of the riches and the honor causes him to question the word of the Lord that he's already received. He's already been given the answer to this and the amount of money and the number of princes doesn't change the answer. And he ought to know better.

So 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 God allowing Balaam freedom of choice. He's already gotten the word of God and he ought to know better but he is looking for a way to go with him.

He desperately wants to go with him. And Balaam at this point is not looking for a way to execute the will of God is he? He's looking for a way to go with the princes. Even the first time he said I'd love to go with you but God has not given me permission.

He doesn't say it's the wrong thing. These are people whom God has blessed. He just says well God won't give me permission.

And so he's only being held in not by his heart which ought to be the same as God's heart and his will which ought to be the same as God's will. He is only being held in by the express forbidding command of God. That's the only thing holding him back.

If it wasn't for that he would happily go and grab the riches. And this is Balaam's error. And this is the problem in the garden isn't it? The only thing that kept Eve from eating the fruit right away was well God has said we shouldn't eat it or touch it.

And as soon as the serpent gives her room to get around the prohibition she takes and eats. Because the battle in the heart has already been lost. And then all that's left is just the command.

And we have to watch out for that in our lives. Do we refrain from being unfaithful to God? Do we refrain from being unfaithful to one another only because of the prohibition? Or does the nature of our thinking forbid that? Do we not even want to go down that road or do we want to but we're reined in by the prohibitions? This is the question we have to ask ourselves. Am I only staying on the straight and narrow because there's a negative command involved? Or is my heart of such a nature that I wouldn't go down that road even if the door were open? This is the test.

And it's important to see it because Balaam is a believer. And this is the test that he fails as we will see. You think at first well gosh God has given him permission.

Does God change his mind? We know from scripture God is not a man that he should change his mind. God has already said this people is blessed and Balaam ought to know better and he ought to be wary when God says sure go ahead and go. Reminds us of the prophet talking in I believe it's in 2 Kings where the king consults all the false prophets and they say go and win a victory and he consults the true prophet and he says sure go and win a victory.

And the king is suspicious and says now tell me what your true prophecy is. And he says if you go you're going to be killed. Well you have the same kind of a thing going on here.

Do we have a heart that seeks the things of God and the attitudes of God and the

purposes of God or are we just looking for a way around the prohibition? Well Balaam demonstrates the nature of his heart here. So as soon as God says go ahead and go he is anxious to go. So Balaam rose in the morning verse 21 saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab.

Then God's anger was aroused because he went. And the good old King James says the anger of the Lord was kindled because he went. And the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as an adversary against him.

And he was riding on his donkey and his two servants were with him. You don't hear anymore about the servants here. It's interesting that there are two servants with him.

The donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand. The last time we saw an angel with a drawn sword is at the entrance of the garden. And Balaam is going in a way that he should not go.

In this case it's not guarding the way to the tree of life. It is prohibiting, forbidding Balaam from going away that God does not want him to go. He's on his way to go with the evil men, to go with Balak and the princes of Moab.

Midian and Moab, well-known evil antagonists and enemies of the people of God, the nation of Israel. And he's compromising. He's going with them.

He says, well, I can go with them. I just won't speak any words against the people. Looking for a way around the prohibition.

So the angel takes his stand with a sword in his hand. And the donkey turned his side out of the way and went into the field. So Balaam struck the donkey to turn her back onto the road.

This is try number one to get past the angel. So then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards with a wall on this side and a wall on that side. And 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. When's the last time we had a reference to a foot being crushed? He shall bruise thy head. Thou shalt bruise his heel.

And here you have the foot of Balaam being crushed in the conflict. He's trying to go down the evil way. So then the angel of the Lord went further and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left.

When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she lay down under Balaam. Balaam's anger was aroused and he struck the donkey with his staff. And the connections from this passage throughout Scripture are so many.

You think about Moses when his anger is aroused and he strikes the rock with his staff. But then in verse 28, the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey and she says to Balaam, what have I done to you that you have struck me these three times? When Eve stands before the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you look back at Genesis chapter 2, keep your finger here in Numbers 22, but go back to Genesis chapter 2. There are three things that motivate her.

There are three considerations that go through her mind that she has to make a decision one way or the other. In verse 6 of chapter 3, when the woman saw, number one, the tree was good for food. Here's an opportunity.

Well, it's good for food, but God has said no. Number two, it was pleasant to the eyes. It doesn't look like there's anything to matter with it.

I don't see any appearance of evil here, but God hath said. Number three, a tree desirable to make one wise. And that's the threefold opportunity, the three knocks on the door to reach up and take the fruit of the tree.

And here you have Balaam with his threefold try to get down the road, going down the road of evil, going down the wrong road, because his heart is wrong. He is covetous. He's allured by the riches and the honor that Balak promises him.

And so he's trying to find a way around the prohibition. You see this threefold temptation many places in Scripture, don't you? I don't even have to mention, I'm sure it's already occurred to you, the threefold temptation of Christ. The thorn in the flesh that three times Paul asks to have removed.

The threefold denial that Peter executes, the three times that he denies the Lord outside the place of trial of the Lord. And so the donkey speaks, and the last time in the Bible, in fact the only other time in the Bible that an animal speaks was back in the garden when the serpent spoke. And here, sort of by way of contrast, you have the mouth of the donkey saying, what have I done to you that you have struck me these three times? And this mirrors the pattern of conversation in the garden.

The serpent spoke, Eve replied, the serpent speaks again. And you just have those two times that the serpent speaks. Here the donkey is going to speak, Balaam will reply, and the donkey will speak again, and then the conversation is over.

So she says, what have I done to you that you have struck me these three times? Balaam said to the donkey, because you have abused me. Now he has just struck this donkey and he has beaten it unmercifully with a staff, and he says, you have abused me, you donkey. If there were a sword in my hand, I would kill you, Balaam says.

There is somebody standing there with a sword in his hand, isn't there? And there is a way that seems right to a man, but the ends thereof are the ways of death, Proverbs 14.

I believe it's 14.19, if memory serves. I don't have that written down.

But there is a way that seems right to a man, the ends thereof are the ways of death. And he says, I would kill this donkey, and the donkey is in fact preserving his life. So after he says this, the donkey says, hey, if you can only see there's an angel in the path and he's about to kill you.

That's not what the donkey says, is it? The donkey says, you ought to know better. I am your donkey. Am I not your donkey in which you have ridden ever since I became yours unto this day? Was I ever disposed to do this to you? This ought to tell you something, Balaam.

Wake up and smell the coffee. If something unusual is happening here, if the donkey is turning out of the way, the donkey that has served you well ever since you've owned it, that ought to be a wake up call. This ought to remind you.

This ought to give you pause for thought. Why is this perfectly obedient donkey suddenly turning out of the way these three times? Because something's wrong. Wake up.

Pay attention. You're going down the wrong road, but it doesn't wake him up. Instead, he would kill the very thing that is trying to wake him up and warn him and preserve his life.

So in verse 31, then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes and he sees 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, 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.

There's a lot you could say about the angel of the Lord being an angel on the one hand and yet speaking the words of God himself on the other. But verse 33, 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, this donkey is smarter than you. This donkey is able to draw a conclusion better than you are from the available evidence. Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, the same thing that Adam says, the same thing that Eve says in the garden when they are faced and confronted with their error, the same thing that David says when Nathan confronts him with his error.

I have sinned. Balaam has a relationship with God and Balaam ought to know better and Balaam recognizes that and Balaam confesses his sin. I have sinned.

I did not know you stood in the way against me, but I ought to have known. God told him the very first time he appeared to him, don't go with them. This is a blessed people.

And the first crack in the door, the first way around the prohibition that he could find, Balaam took it because his heart is not really with God. And this is the nature of prohibitions. Prohibitions don't give us power.

A lot of times people want to preach the Ten Commandments. Thou shalt not commit adultery. That's one of the Ten Commandments.

And we think that simply knowing the prohibition is going to be enough to keep us from doing that. The prohibition tells us where God stands, but to fulfill those commands, we've got to have a heart that follows after God, a heart that reflects the truth of Proverbs chapter 2. It's not enough to know the prohibition. We have to have that transformed heart that seeks the things of God.

And the history of Israel is a history of people who have the commandments and who don't follow them. And Balaam illustrates that and sums it up in the same way that Eve does in the garden. And Adam and Eve face that decision and all of their descendants from that day to this face that decision on a daily basis.

We know where God stands. We know the choice between good and evil. We know that there's a prohibition of evil.

We know that there's an exhortation to the good. But knowledge of the prohibition is not enough. We've got to cultivate a heart that seeks and follows after God.

And there is a way. There is a way that leads to death and there is a way that leads to life. So as you follow the story of Balaam here, you find as you go on down, and one of these days we're going to cover this in detail, this is one of the most fascinating sections of scripture there is.

It's such a shame to me that most Sunday school children learn the story of Balaam because the donkey talks, and that's kind of a neat thing. And along with that you get a little bit of a lesson that you ought to go the way God wants you to. But this is one of the richest passages of scripture.

These couple of chapters here, beginning with the episode of the serpents and going through the blessings and cursings involved here. You have the people before this grouching and complaining against Moses and being afflicted with the serpents and having to look to the serpent to be delivered. But yet, look at chapter 23 of Numbers.

After this episode and the angel faces Balaam in the road and says, go ahead and go with these people, but only speak the word that I speak to you that you shall speak. And Balaam now goes, but he is a much chastened prophet at this point. And the allure of the riches has faded in the face of the life and death importance of this mission that God has faced him with.

And so he says with a new sense of conviction in verse 38, I have come to you. Do I have any power to say anything? The word that God puts in my mouth that I must speak. And so he goes with Balaam.

And in chapter 23, verse 1, he tells Balaam, build seven altars for me here. Prepare for me seven bulls and seven rams. Balaam does so.

He says, go stand by your burnt offering. I will go. Perhaps the Lord will come to meet me and whatever he shows me, I will tell you.

So he went to a desolate height. And this is one of the high places of Balaam. And in verse 4 of chapter 23, God met Balaam and he said, I prepared seven altars.

I have offered on each altar a bull and a ram. Now, notice he says, I've prepared these seven altars. This is a hint of some other communication between God and Balaam we don't have recorded.

So the Lord put a word in Balaam's mouth and said, return to Balaam and thus you shall speak. He returned to him, standing by the burnt offering. He and all the princes of Moab.

Here we go in verse 70, took up his oracle and said, Balaam, the king of Moab has brought me from Aram, from the mountains of the east. Come, curse Jacob for me and come denounce Israel. How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how shall I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced? For from the top of the rocks I see him and from the hills I behold him there, a people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations.

Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number one-fourth of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous and let my end be like his. Now notice, these are things that are said of Israel right after the serpent episode, right after the snakes and the plague and a bunch of people dying. This is the view of God on Israel.

Why? Because they have looked at the bronze serpent. They have acknowledged their sin. We have sinned, the people of Moses, appealed to God on our behalf.

So now when God looks at them, he says, these are the ones who are not cursed by God. These are the ones who are not denounced by God. They have been cleansed by claiming the confession route of return to God.

Look at verse 18, the second oracle. Verse 19, God is not a man that he should lie, nor a son of man that he should repent. Has he said and will not he do? Or has he spoken and will I have received a command to bless.

He has blessed and I cannot reverse it. Look at verse 21. He has not observed iniquity in

Jacob, nor has he seen wickedness in Israel.

The Lord his God is with him, and the shout of a king is among them. He says this about the people of chapter 21. Why? How can he say that? The same way that David can stand and say, I stand before God in my righteousness.

Because when God cleanses, you are cleansed. When God forgives, you are forgiven. And God does not observe iniquity and he doesn't see righteousness.