

INTRODUCTION TO NUMBERS CHAPTER 24

This chapter continues and concludes the history of the defeat of the counsels of Balak and Balaam against Israel, not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord of hosts; and as great an instance it is of God's power over the children of men, and his favour towards his own children, as any of the victories recorded in the book of the wars of the Lord. What preparation was made the third time for the cursing of Israel we read of in the close of the foregoing chapter. In this chapter we are told,

- I. What the blessing was into which that intended curse was turned, [#Nu 24:1-9](#).
- II. How Balak dismissed Balaam from his service thereupon, [#Nu 24:10-13](#).
- III. The predictions Balaam left behind him concerning Israel, and some of the neighbouring nations, [#Nu 24:14-25](#).

Ver. 1. thru Ver. 9.

The blessing itself which Balaam here pronounces upon Israel is much the same with the two we had in the foregoing chapter; but the introduction to it is different.

I. The method of proceeding here varies much in several instances.

1. Balaam laid aside the enchantments which he had hitherto depended on, used no spells, or charms, or magic arts, finding they did him no service; it was to no purpose to deal with the devil for a curse, when it was plain that God was determined immovably to bless, [#Nu 24:1](#). Sooner or later God will convince men of their folly in seeking after lying vanities, which cannot profit. To what purpose should he seek for enchantment? He knew that God was out of the reach of them.
2. He did not now retire into a solitary place as before, but set his face directly towards the wilderness where Israel lay encamped; and, since there is no remedy, but they must be blessed, he will design nothing else, but will submit by compulsion.
3. Now *the Spirit of God came upon him*, that is, the Spirit of prophecy, as upon Saul to prevent him from taking David, [#1Sa 19:23](#). He spoke not his own sense, but the language of the Spirit that came upon him.
4. He used a different preface now from what he had used before ([#Nu 24:3,4](#)), much like that of David ([#2Sa 23:1-3](#)), yet savouring very much (as some think) of pride and vain-glory, taking all the praise of this prophecy to himself, and magnifying himself as one of the cabinet-council of heaven. Two things he boasts of:--

(1.) The favour God did him in making known himself to him. He *heard the words of God, and saw the vision of the Almighty*. God himself had met him and spoken to him ([#Nu 23:16](#)), and with this he was greatly puffed up. Paul speaks with humility of his visions and revelations ([#2Co 12:1](#)), but Balaam speaks of his with pride.

(2.) His own power to receive and bear those revelations. He fell into a trance indeed, as other prophets did, but he had his eyes open. This he mentions twice; but the words in the original are not the same. The *man whose eyes were shut*, some think it may be read so ([#Nu 24:3](#)), but now having his eyes open, ([#Nu 24:4](#)). When he attempted to curse Israel, he owns, he was in a mistake, but now he began to see his error, and yet still he remained blinded by covetousness and ambition, those foolish and hurtful lusts. Note,

[1.] Those that oppose God and his people will sooner or later be made to see themselves wretchedly deceived.

[2.] Many have their eyes open that have not their hearts open, are enlightened, but not sanctified; and that knowledge which puffs men up with pride will but serve to light them to hell, whither many go with their eyes open.

II. Yet the blessing is for substance the same with those before. Several things he admires in Israel:--

1. Their beauty (#Nu 24:5): *How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob!* Though they dwelt not in stately palaces, but in coarse and homely tents, and these, no doubt, sadly weather beaten, yet Balaam sees a beauty in those tents, because of their admirable order, according to their tribes, #Nu 24:2. Nothing recommends religion more to the good opinion of those that look upon it at a distance than the unity and harmony of its professors, #Ps 133:1. The amiableness of this people, and the great reputation they should gain among their neighbours, are compared (#Nu 24:6) to the beauty and sweetness of fruitful valleys and fine gardens, flourishing trees and fragrant spices. Note, Those whose eyes are open see the saints on the earth to be excellent ones, and their delight is accordingly in them. *The righteous, doubtless, is more excellent than his neighbour.* They are *trees which the Lord has planted*; that is their excellency. The branches of righteousness are the planting of the Lord. See #Ho 14:5-7.

2. Their fruitfulness and increase. This may be intended by those similitudes (#Nu 24:6) of the valleys, gardens, and trees, as well as by those expressions (#Nu 24:7), *He shall pour the water out of his buckets*; that is, God shall water them with his blessing like rain from heaven, and then his *seed shall be in many waters*. Compare #Ho 2:23, *I will sow her unto me in the earth*. And waters are in scripture put for *peoples, and multitudes, and nations*. This has been fulfilled in the wonderful increase of that nation and their vast multitude even in their dispersion.

3. Their honour and advancement. As the multitude of the people is the honour of the prince, so the magnificence of the prince is the honour of the people; Balaam therefore foretells that their *king shall be higher than Agag*. Agag, it is probable, was the most potent monarch in those parts; Balaam knew of none more considerable than he was; he rose above the rest of his neighbours. But Balaam foretels that Israel's chief commander, who, after Moses, was Joshua, should be more great and honourable than ever Agag was, and make a far better figure in history. Saul, their first king, triumphed over Agag, though, it is said, *he came delicately*.

4. Their power and victory, #Nu 24:8.

(1.) He looks back upon what they had done, or rather what had been done for them: *God brought them forth out of Egypt*; this he had spoken of before, #Nu 23:22. The wonders that attended their deliverance out of Egypt contributed more to their honour, and the terror of their adversaries, than any thing else, #Jos 2:10. He that brought them out of Egypt will not fail to bring them into Canaan, for, *as for God, his work is perfect*.

(2.) He looks down upon their present strength. Israel hath, as it were, *the strength of a unicorn*, of which creature it is said (#Job 39:9,10), *Will he be willing to serve thee, or abide by thy crib? Canst thou bind him with his band in the furrow?*

"No, Israel is too powerful to be checked or held in by my curses or thy armies."

(3.) He looks forward to their future conquests: *He shall eat up the nations his enemies;* that is,

"He shall not only destroy and devour them as easily and irresistibly as a lion does his prey, but he shall himself be strengthened, and fattened, and enriched, by their spoils."

5. Their courage and security: *He lay down as a lion, as a great lion, #Nu 24:9.* Now he does so in the plains of Moab, and asks no leave of the king of Moab, nor is he in fear of him; shortly will he do so in Canaan. When he has torn his prey, he will take his repose, *quiet from the fear of evil*, and bid defiance to all his neighbours; for who shall stir up a sleeping lion? It is observed of lions (as the learned bishop Patrick takes notice here) that they do not retire into places of shelter to sleep, but lie down any where, knowing that none dares meddle with them: thus secure were Israel in Canaan, chiefly in the days of David and Solomon; and thus is *the righteous bold as a lion (#Pr 28:1)*, not to assault others, but to repose themselves, because *God maketh them to dwell in safety, #Ps 4:8.*
6. Their interest, and influence upon their neighbours. Their friends, and those in alliance with them, were happy: *Blessed is he that blesseth thee;* those that do them any kindness will certainly fare the better for it. But their enemies, and those in arms against them, were certainly miserable: *Cursed is he that curseth thee;* those that do them any injury do it at their peril; for God takes what is done to them, whether good or evil, as done to himself. Thus he confirms the blessing of Abraham (*#Ge 12:3*), and speaks as if *therefore* he did at this time bless Israel, and not curse them, because he desired to share in the blessing of Israel's friends and dreaded the curse on Israel's enemies.

Ver. 10. thru Ver. 14.

We have here the conclusion of this vain attempt to curse Israel, and the total abandonment of it.

1. Balak made the worst of it. He broke out into a rage against Balaam (*#Nu 24:10*), expressed both in words and gesture the highest degree of vexation at the disappointment; he smote his hands together, for indignation, to see all his measures thus broken, and his project baffled. He charged Balaam with putting upon him the basest affront and cheat imaginable:

"I called thee to curse my enemies, and thou hast shown thyself in league with them, and in their interests, for thou hast blessed them these three times, though, by appointing the altars to be built and sacrifices to be offered, thou madest me believe thou wouldest certainly curse them."

Hereupon he forbade him his presence, expelled him his country, upbraided him with the preferments he had designed to bestow upon him, but now would not (*#Nu 24:11*):

"The Lord hath kept thee back from honour. See what thou gettest by pleasing the Lord, instead of pleasing me; thou has hindered thy preferment by it."

Thus those who are any way losers by their duty are commonly upbraided with it, as fools, for preferring it before their interest in the world. Whereas, if Balaam had been voluntary

and sincere in his adherence to the word of the Lord, though he lost the honour Balak designed him by it, God would have made that loss up to him abundantly to his advantage.

2. Balaam made the best of it.

(1.) He endeavours to excuse the disappointment. And a very good excuse he has for it, that God restrained him from saying what he would have said, and constrained him to say what he would not; and that this was what Balak ought not to be displeased at, not only because he could not help it, but because he had told Balak before what he must depend upon, **#Nu 24:12,13**. Balak could not say that he had cheated him, since he had given him fair notice of the check he found himself under.

(2.) He endeavours to atone for it, **#Nu 24:14**. Though he cannot do what Balak would have him do, yet,

[1.] He will gratify his curiosity with some predictions concerning the nations about him. It is natural to us to be pleased with prophecy, and with this he hopes to pacify the angry prince.

[2.] He will satisfy him with an assurance that, whatever this formidable people should do to his people, it should not be till the latter days; so that he, for his part, needed not to fear any mischief or molestation from them; the *vision was for a great while to come*, but in his days there should be peace.

[3.] He will put him into a method of doing Israel a mischief without the ceremonies of enchantment and execration. This seems to be implied in that word: *I will advertise thee*; for it properly signifies, *I will counsel thee*. What the counsel was is not set down here, because it was given privately, but we are told afterwards what it was, **#Nu 31:16**. He counselled him to entice the Israelites to idolatry, **#Re 2:14**. Since he could not have leave from God to curse them, he puts him in a way of getting help from the devil to tempt them. *Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo--If I cannot move heaven, I will solicit hell.*

Ver. 15. thru Ver. 25.

The office of prophets was both to bless and to prophesy in the name of the Lord. Balaam, as a prophet, per force had blessed Israel; here he foretels future events.

I. His preface is much the same as that, **#Nu 24:3,4**. He personates a true prophet admirably well, God permitting and directing him to do so, because, whatever he was, the prophecy itself was a true prophecy. He boasts,

1. That his eyes are open (**#Nu 24:15**), for prophets were *in old time called seers* (**#1Sa 9:9**), because they must speak what they had seen, and therefore, before they opened their lips, it was necessary that they should have their eyes open.
2. That he has *heard the words of God*, which many do that do not heed them, nor hear God in them.
3. That he *knew the knowledge of the Most High*; this is added here. A man may be full of the knowledge of God and yet utterly destitute of the grace of God, may receive the truth in the light of it and yet be a stranger to the love of it.
4. That *he saw the vision of the Almighty*, but not so as to be *changed into the same*

image. He calls God the *Most High*, and the *Almighty*; no man could speak more honourably of him, nor seem to put a greater value upon his acquaintance with him, and yet he had no true fear of him, love to him, or faith in him, so far may a man go towards heaven, and yet come short.

II. Here is his prophecy concerning him that should be the crown and glory of his people Israel, who is,

1. David in the type, who *not now*, not quickly, but in process of time, should *smite the corners of Moab*. (#Nu 24:17), and take possession of Mount Seir, and under whom the forces of Israel should *do valiantly*, #Nu 24:18. This was fulfilled when David smote Moab, and *measured them with a line*, so that *the Moabites became David's servants*, #2Sa 8:2. And at the same time the Edomites likewise were brought into obedience to Israel, #Nu 24:14. But,
2. Our Lord Jesus, the promised Messiah, is chiefly pointed at in the antitype, and of him it is an illustrious prophecy; it was the will of God that notice should thus be given of his coming, a great while before, not only to the people of the Jews, but to other nations, because his gospel and kingdom were to extend themselves so far beyond the borders of the land of Israel. It is here foretold,

(1.) That his coming should not be yet of a great while:

"I shall see him, but not now; I do see him in vision, but at a very great distance, through the interposing space of 1500 years at least."

Or understand it thus:--Balaam, a wicked man, shall see Christ, but shall not see him nigh, nor see him as Job, who saw him *as his Redeemer*, and saw him for himself, #Job 19:25,27. When he comes in the clouds *every eye shall see him*, but many will see him (as the rich man in hell saw Abraham) *afar off*.

(2.) That he shall come out of Jacob, and Israel, as a star and a sceptre, the former denoting his glory and lustre, and the *bright and morning star*, the latter his power and authority; it is *he that shall have dominion*. Perhaps this prophecy of Balaam (one of the children of the east) concerning a star that should arise out of Jacob, as the indication of a sceptre arising in Israel, being preserved by a tradition of that country, gave occasion to the wise men, who were of the east too, upon the sight of an unusual star over the land of Judea, to enquire for him that was *born king of the Jews*, #Mt 2:2.

(3.) That his kingdom shall be universal, and victorious over all opposition, which was typified by David's victories over Moab and Edom. But the Messiah shall destroy, or, as some read it, *shall rule over, all the children of Seth* (#Nu 24:17), that is, all the children of men, who descend from Seth, the son of Adam, the descendants of the rest of Adam's sons being cut off by the deluge. Christ shall be king, not only of Jacob and Israel, but of all the world; so that all the children of Seth shall be either governed by his golden sceptre or dashed in pieces by his iron rod. He shall set up a universal rule, authority, and power, of his own, and shall put down all opposing rule, #1Co 15:24. He shall *unwall all the children of Seth*; so some read it. He shall take down all their defences and carnal confidences, so that they shall either admit his government or lie open to his judgments.

(4.) That his Israel shall do valiantly; the subjects of Christ, animated by his might, shall maintain a spiritual war with the powers of darkness, and be more than conquerors. *The people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits*, #Da 11:32.

III. Here is his prophecy concerning the Amalekites and Kenites, part of whose country, it is probable, he had now in view.

1. The Amalekites were now the *chief of the nations* (#Nu 24:20), therefore Agag was spoken of (#Nu 24:7) as an eminent prince, and they were the first that engaged Israel when they came out of Egypt; but the time will come when that nation, as great as it looks now, will be totally ruined and rooted out: *His latter end shall be that he perish for ever*. Here Balaam confirms that doom of Amalek which Moses had read (#Ex 17:14,16), where God had sworn that he would have *perpetual war with Amalek*. Note, Those whom God is at war with will certainly perish for ever; for when God judges he will overcome.

2. The Kenites were now the securest of the nations; their situation was such as that nature was their engineer, and had strongly fortified them:

"Thou puttest thy nest (like the eagle) in a rock, #Nu 24:21. Thou thinkest thyself safe, and yet the Kenites shall be wasted (#Nu 24:22) and gradually brought to decay, till they be carried away captive by the Assyrians,"

which was done at the captivity of the ten tribes. Note, Bodies politic, like natural bodies, though of the strongest constitutions, will gradually decay, and come to ruin at last; even a nest in a rock will be no perpetual security.

IV. Here is a prophecy that looks as far forward as the Greeks and Romans, for theirs is supposed to be meant by the *coast of Chittim, #Nu 24:24*.

1. The introduction to this parable; this article of his prophecy is very observable (#Nu 24:23): *Alas! who shall live when God doeth this?* Here he acknowledges all the revolutions of states and kingdoms to be the Lord's doing: *God doeth this*; whoever are the instruments, he is the supreme director. But he speaks mournfully concerning them, and has a very melancholy prospect of these events: *Who shall live?* Either,

(1.) These events are so distant, and so far off to come, that it is hard to say *who shall live till they come*; but, whoever shall live to see them, there will be amazing turns. Or,

(2.) They will be so dismal, and make such desolations, that scarcely any will escape or be left alive; who shall live when death rides in triumph? #Re 6:8. Those that live then will be as brands plucked out of the fire, and will have their lives given them as a prey. God fit us for the worst of times!

2. The prophecy itself is observable. Both Greece and Italy lie much upon the sea, and therefore their armies were sent forth mostly in ships. Now he seems here to foretell,

(2.) That the forces of the Grecians should humble and bring down the Assyrians, who were united with the Persians, which was fulfilled when the eastern country was overcome, or overrun rather, by Alexander.

(2.) That theirs and the Roman forces should afflict the Hebrews, or Jews, who were called *the children of Eber*; this was fulfilled in part when the Grecian empire was oppressive to the Jewish nation, but chiefly when the Roman empire ruined it and put a period to it. But,

(3.) That Chittim, that is, the Roman empire, in which the Grecian was at length swallowed up, should itself perish for ever, when the stone cut out of the mountain

without hands shall consume all these kingdoms, and particularly the *feet of iron and clay*, **#Da 2:34**. Thus (says Dr. Lightfoot) Balaam, instead of cursing the church, curses Amalek the first, and Rome the last, enemy of the church. And so *let all thy enemies perish, O Lord!*