**Balaam’s First Oracle**

In the 1997 film *Liar, Liar* Jim Carrey acts in the role of Fletcher Reede, a divorced attorney who is an inveterate liar. While this skill is valuable in his profession, it wreaks havoc on his family life. His son wishes that his father would be unable to lie for an entire day. His son’s wish is granted and Reede is subjected to numerous situations where his candor blazes a trail of wreckage in his personal and professional life. In our study of Numbers chapter 23, we see that Balaam is unable to say anything other than what God puts in his mouth despite his desire to personally profit from cursing the Israelites (see Psalm 64:8). At the end of chapter 22, Balak took Balaam up to a high place known as Bamoth Baal where they could see the Israelite camp below. As the name would imply, this was a site dedicated to the false god Baal. Chapter 23 begins with Balaam telling Balak to build 7 altars and prepare 7 bulls and 7 rams. Balak did as instructed and the animals were sacrificed on the altars. Balaam told Balak to stay with **his** offering while he went to look for God. God met with him and Balaam told God that **he** had prepared 7 altars had offered a bull and a ram on each. This reminds me of a joke about a conservative and liberal who encounter a homeless man on the sidewalk. The conservative felt compassion for the man and gave him $20. The liberal, moved by the generosity of his friend, pulled another $20 from the pocket of the conservative and gave it to the homeless man (see 2nd Sam. 24:24).

When God met with Balaam, he put a message in Balaam’s mouth and sent him back to Balak. When he returned to Balak, he recited his first oracle; it is delivered in 4 parts. First he told of how he had been summoned from his faraway land for the purpose of cursing Israel. Next he acknowledges that whatever power he possesses is inferior to God and that he is unable to go against God’s will. He then identifies the Israelites as righteous, noting that they live apart from the world. Finally he aspired to obtaining their righteousness. While he expressed a desire to die as a righteous man, his death came as a result of his wickedness. Matthew Henry noted that Balaam pronounced the Israelites happy in their peculiarity, happy in their numbers and happy in their end. Balak was appalled at what he heard; he had paid for a curse but witnessed a blessing.

Next Balak took Balaam to the top of Mount Pisgah where he again built 7 altars, offering a ram and bull on each. Once again Balaam had him wait by the altar as he sought guidance from God. God gave Balaam another message which Balaam took back to Balak in the form of his second oracle. In this oracle Balaam spoke of God’s sovereignty, how He was not a man who would lie or change His mind or speak without acting. He had given Balaam a command to bless and he could not change that. He then told how God was with the Israelites and His presence kept misery and misfortune away from them. He said that no sorcery or divination would be effective against them. His last statement probably frightened Balak the most; like a lion Israel would devour its prey. Wanting to put the genie back in the bottle, Balak asked Balaam to neither bless nor curse. Again Balaam replied that he could only do what God directed him to do. The chapter ends with Balak taking Balaam to another vantage point to view the Israelites in hopes that he would curse them. Here he sees the folly of depending on Balaam and hopes that God Himself would be pleased to have Balaam curse them.