

BLAST VIDEO #9: "SAY WHAT!?"

(Numbers 22)

8.3.20

When I was a little kid, I used to love watching cartoons. Back in the day, those would be things like Bugs Bunny and Road Runner, Huckleberry Hound and Yogi Bear and Jonny Quest, and a barnyard rooster Foghorn Leghorn. Now those may not be familiar to you, but those are the cartoons I grew up with. And to be perfectly honest, I still love cartoons - the humor, somebody getting run over by something and popping right back up, all of it. There's a collection of Road Runner cartoons on YouTube that I still pull up on occasion, just for the laughs I know I'm going to get.

One of the things that most cartoons feature, almost to the point that you don't even think about it, is talking animals - Bugs Bunny asking, "What's up, Doc?" Daffy Duck getting his beak blown off by a hunter and telling his adversary, "You're despicable." Tweety Bird saying, "I thought I saw a puty cat."

It's funny because we know, in the real world, that animals can't talk - at least not like people. Now they can communicate. I've had dogs for most of my life so I know what they're trying to tell me: staring at me and a slight "boof" under their breath means, "Hey, I'm hungry." Heading toward the door, especially in a hurry, means, "Unless you want to clean the carpet, I need to get outside." Sitting on the floor, staring at me, often with a paw raised, means, "May I please come up and lay in your lap?" As you get to know animals, you understand what they're trying to tell you.

But never with words - you know, people words, like you and I use. That's what makes today's Bible story so good. In fact, this story is a genuine blast! It's found in the book of Numbers, the fourth book in the Old Testament. It revolves around a guy named Balaam and a donkey he owned who gave him a memory for the rest of his life. Our story is called, "Say What!?"

Our story takes place just before the nation of Israel finally, after 40 long years of wandering in the wilderness, actually gets to finally enter into the Promised Land. Now we think that the number of people that were being led by Moses was somewhere around two million people. Can you imagine what a crowd of two million would look like? Well, for a guy named Balak, the king of the land of Moab, it was downright frightening. He had heard that these people were basically undefeated in any war that their God was directing them to fight. They had defeated some pretty strong armies - and now they were coming closer to his kingdom. What could he do?

He had an idea. If Israel couldn't be beaten on the battlefield, maybe they could be beaten another way. He had heard of a guy named Balaam who reportedly had the power to call down curses from gods that would bring all kinds of disaster and bad luck on people. Now all false religions are a bit strange - starting with putting their faith in gods that don't even exist. But that didn't stop people from what they believed to be real anyway. Now a curse, which Balak wanted Balaam to perform against Israel, was basically a prayer to whatever god was called upon to bring injury and harm to somebody - a person or even a nation - to the point that they would be greatly weakened and no threat to anybody - like to Balak and his kingdom.

With that in mind, Balak sent some of his officials to ask Balaam to perform such a service against Israel. They also brought a whole lot of money to help persuade him. When Balaam heard their request, he told them to stay the night while he inquired to the God of Israel as to what should be done.

Now Balaam had no relationship with God, so God came to him - telling him in no uncertain terms: ***"Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed" - God speaking, Numbers 22:12.*** In other words, "Don't even think about wishing harm on these people. The people of Israel are My people, people on whom I have placed My favor." And the next day, Balaam told the officials of Moab, "No can do. Their God won't let me come with you." So, the officials returned home.

But when they came back empty handed, Balak refused to give up. Instead he sent more officials back to

Balaam, this time with more money. Again, Balaam told them to spend the night and that he would ask God again. Well, God again spoke to Balaam that night, telling 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" - God speaking, Numbers 22:20 (NKJV)**. The idea is that, especially with a whole bunch of men coming to see him, they likely would have come as a caravan, with their own tents and other provisions. So, they most likely were staying nearby but not in Balaam's house. So, God's instructions were: "If these guys come to your house to get you, then you can go with them." But notice a small but incredibly important word that God included in His message to Balaam: "IF." If this happens, then OK - but not unless this happens. Unfortunately, what did happen was that Balaam woke the next morning and saddled his donkey and headed to Moab - with nobody showing up at his house to get him to come. Oops!

Now this guy was operating outside God's commands - and God doesn't like that, not even a little bit. It's called sin, and God hates sin. And the Bible says that God hated what Balaam had decided on his own to do: **God was very angry when he went - Numbers 22:11a**. So, what did God do to persuade Balaam to stop? He employed an angel - and Balaam's donkey, and this is what happened:

The angel stood in the road where Balaam was traveling, standing there with a drawn sword in his hand. Now Balaam couldn't see him, but the donkey could. Scared out of his little donkey mind, the animal turned off the road and skidaddled into a field. Balaam was furious, and he beat the donkey to get it to return to the road. Then the road narrowed as they passed through some vineyards, with walls on both sides. Again, the angel showed up, blocking the road. Again, the donkey saw what Balaam couldn't. This time, it pressed against the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. Again, he angrily beat the donkey to get it to start moving. Finally, they came to a very narrow part of the road where there was no room to turn away - not to the right or left. And again, the angel appeared, blocking the road. This time, with no place to go, the donkey simply lay down under Balaam. Another beating - but this time, an incredible response. The Bible says the donkey actually spoke to Balaam, like human words, asking him: **"What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"** Say what!?! But Balaam answered back, like talking with a donkey was something he did every day: **"You have made a fool of me! If only I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now."** When was the last time you had a conversation with an animal? Anyway, then [t]he donkey said to Balaam, **"Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?"** Balaam had to confess the truth: **"No," he said**. Then God allowed Balaam to see what the donkey had been seeing all the time, and what Balaam hadn't been able to see at all: **he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown**. I'm sure he wondered if his life was about to end right then and there but, instead, [t]he angel of the Lord asked him, **"Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me. The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If it had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you . . . but I would have let the donkey live."** Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, **"I have sinned."** Yeah, no kidding.

Now, as it turned out, the angel did allow Balaam to proceed to meet with the king of Moab. And God was going to use their time together to reveal Himself to both men. But what's really interesting is how personally God intervened in the life of this man who never knew Him personally and was more in love with money than with any connection to any divine being. But what God wanted Balaam (and us) to know is that we need to take God's word seriously - all of it. We can't just read a part or listen to a part that we agree with or that makes us comfortable or that seems easy, and then ignore the parts that seem difficult. We need to obey every word - even the little ones like "if."

And God will use anything He can to communicate with us and direct us - maybe even something as amazing as a talking animal. That's how much God loves us; He will do whatever He has to to make sure that we are following His best path for our lives. Isn't that cool? That is the mark of an amazing God, full of love and grace for all His children, all the time.