

## INTRODUCTION

Bad news very often may not seem that bad when you look at it from a different angle. An old Chinese tale was told about a man who owned a wealth of fine horses. For simplicity I would just call him Mr. Zhang. One day, a horse of his ran away. Neighbors consoled Zhang about his loss. But the man replied: “Why should I hastily conclude that this is a misfortune?” The strayed horse came back several months later, accompanied by another nice horse. Everyone thus congratulated Zhang. But he reacted: “Why should I hastily conclude that this cannot be unfortunate?” The family had a son who loved to ride horse. One day the son tried out the new horse. But he fell off from it and broke his leg. People showed their compassion to Zhang. But he said: “Why should I hastily conclude that this is not fortunate?” Soon the country was involved in a war. All the able-bodied men were drafted to fight the enemies. The son was spared because he could not walk properly. The moral of the story is that we should not draw our conclusion too early, because bad things can be a blessing in disguise. God often surprises us that way. In the Bible, Israel were God's chosen people. God had promised to bless them. Even king Balak of Moab knew that. Balak was aware that the Israelites defeated two strong Amorite kings. He was afraid that he would be the next victim. Instead of sending his troop to engage the Israelites in the battlefield, Balak thought of attacking them from behind. He was willing to pay big bucks to hire a professional sorcerer named Balaam to curse the Israelites. Now Balaam was on his way to Moab. How would God's people survive this supernatural assault? We see in the story that God intervened and frustrated the evil scheme. No one could curse whom God had determined to bless. Even today, God can turn a curse in our lives into blessing.

## EXPLANATION

### 1. 超越的視野 “Super-Vision” from God

First, God grants us super-vision to discern His work. In the passage, God gave a donkey super-vision. That donkey belonged to Balaam. There was a series of unusual events after Balaam left for Moab. Look at **verses 21-22**: 21 Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. 22 But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him. Balaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. God was mad because Balaam disobeyed Him and made the trip. Balaam was attracted by the great reward Balak promised him. To show His disapproval, God sent “the angel of the Lord” to block Balaam's way. The word “angel” means a messenger. We shall see later that this angel spoke with authority like God. The same divine agent appeared to Abraham and stopped him from sacrificing his son Isaac on the altar. He also called Moses from a burning bush, and sent him to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. This angel revealed Himself to some other Biblical characters too. Theologians believe that He was the manifestation of Jesus in the Old Testament. Therefore, Bible translators added a definite article “the” to distinguish Him from other angels. This angel stood in the way of Balaam. However, Balaam did not see Him. Was Balaam not a trained wizard who was supposed to perceive spiritual matters? Balaam could not see the angel because God did not give him super-vision in that instance. The funny thing was, God gave such

vision to Balaam's donkey. Let us read **verse 23**: When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, she turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat her to get her back on the road. The animal was scared by the angel, and so she went sideward to the field. Balaam did not know what was going on. He might think that the animal wanted some snack or needed a bathroom break. He hit the donkey to signal her to get back on track. After Balaam traveled some further distance, the angel of the Lord stood at a narrow path. The donkey saw the messenger, so she tried to get around Him. In doing so, she squeezed Balaam's leg against a wall. Balaam thus beat the animal again. Next, the angel positioned Himself in a tight corridor. Seeing that she could not pass through, the donkey sat down on the ground. Balaam was furious and he hit the animal a third time. Then something amazing happened. **Verse 28** says: Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?" God gifted the donkey ability to speak. It is quite comical when you visualize the scene. Brothers and sisters: this is not Disney animation with talking animals. This is God's work. What follows was a conversation between Balaam and his donkey. The animal protested why her master beat her three times, while Balaam was angry at her misbehavior. Finally, God lifted the veil and made Balaam realize what happened behind the scene. Look at **verse 31**: Then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown. Balaam prostrated himself to pay tribute to the supernatural agent. Now he should thank his donkey for saving his life from the angel's sword. Only when God grants us super-vision, then we will be aware of His presence. In **2 Kings chapter 6**, Aram was waging war against Israel. A servant of the prophet Elisha was afraid when he saw a multitude of enemies with horses and chariots. He asked his master what to do. Elisha comforted his servant by telling him that God's army was more numerous than their opponents. If I were the servant, I would reply: "Yeah right! We have better find a cave to hide or look for an escape route." Elisha then prayed for his servant in **verse 17** of the passage: ... "Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see." Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. God bestowed the servant super-vision to see the heavenly troop that protected Israel. God is all-powerful and full of wisdom. He can surely allow us to see a similar vision today. But He does not have to do so. God can speak to us through the Bible. He can also let us see His hands with our hearts. Once I was invited to lead a training. At that time, I was harboring a particular sin inside. I knew it, but out of my stubbornness I did not want to confess it to God. A few days before the meeting I had a cold and I lost my voice. I had the same ailment before. But when the disease struck right before the speaking engagement, I immediately understood that God sent me a warning. Therefore, I humbly asked God for His forgiveness. I learned my lessons. God desires to use a clean vessel to serve Him. The ability to speak is not from me; it is God's grace. The skill to put together a message is not based on my knowledge. It is God who gives me wisdom and articulation. You may have a similar experience before. Perhaps you are forced to change your plan because your car breaks down, the weather turns bad or a friend pops up with an urgent request. As you look back, you realize that God alters some unforeseeable factors to steer you to His plan. Or perhaps you are having a planning meeting with some coworkers. You are amazed at the insight of a particular brother. God gives this person super-vision to integrate Biblical principles to help everyone see things from God's perspective. He does not only propose a solution, but he does so by aligning God's truth. We will be encouraged when we understand that God is beside us. But how can we know for sure that an idea is from God but not from us? There are some fundamental principles we need to cross-

check. First, we need to ask if the outcome brings glory to God, rather than giving credit to people. Second, God would never contradict His general will in the Bible. For example, He will not ask us to lie or steal to achieve His purposes. Third, God's plan should benefit His children. For instance, do people grow in their relationship with the Lord? Are brothers and sisters being motivated to love God and serve Him more?

## 2. 上帝的指導 Supervision of God

God gave Balaam super-vision to know that He was present. He was not one of the many gods Balaam could manipulate for profit. On the contrary, Jehovah was in-charge. God would supervise Balaam what to do and what to say. The angel gave Balaam the same command God said to him the night before. Read **verse 35**: The angel of the Lord said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you." So Balaam went with the princes of Balak. Balaam had no other choice but to obey the order. When Balaam finally arrived in Moab, Balak scolded him for the long delay. Look at **verse 37**: Balak said to Balaam, "Did I not send you an urgent summons? Why didn't you come to me? Am I really not able to reward you?" Balak assumed that Balaam declined the first invitation because he was greedy for a bigger pay-check. It was an insult to Balak if Balaam thought that the king would not compensate him generously. Balaam should be happy to hear a confirmation from Balak for a handsome payment. But now Balaam knew that he had a different mission than making money. He repeated what the Lord asked him to do in **verse 38**: "Well, I have come to you now," Balaam replied. "But can I say just anything? I must speak only what God puts in my mouth." Balak might react in his heart: "Whatever! I don't care which god will give you a message. I called you to curse Israel. Just do your job and submit the bill." Imagine you encounter a tough problem. You have the money to hire the best expert in the market. You want to resolve the matter quickly no matter how much it may cost. That should be the mentality of Balak. He had the money. Balaam had the expertise. But God had the ultimate authority over both persons. God would turn a curse into blessing for Israel. Before we proceed, we need to understand what a curse is in the Bible. We Cantonese are experts in uttering curses. We have enough knowledge of that to compile a dictionary! We bad-mouth our adversaries, hoping that some organs will be missing if they give birth to a son. We want them to be hit by a car when crossing a street, choked by a bone when eating chicken and to contract an incurable disease. In the Bible, a curse is more serious than those misfortunes. A curse is the opposite of a blessing. It is when God's protection is removed and His supply is cut off. We can think of disease, death, drought, famine, war and exile are some forms of curse. But the biggest curse is not about material. It is spiritual and relational. It is when God temporarily forfeit His relationship with people. Calamity will come when God stops becoming our Master, and we have to deal with difficulties by ourselves. With that background in mind now we will do a quick survey of chapters 23 and 24. Balaam made four oracles about Israel in those two chapters. Balak took Balaam to different high places so that Balaam could see the Israelites. Animal sacrifices were made. Those are some usual rituals in the worship of any deity. A priest presents an offering to his god, then he waits for the deity to communicate with him. All four messages appear in the form of poetry. That is not something new because it was common for the Old Testament prophets to convey teachings from God in poems. We can roughly divide the four messages into two groups: the first two were about God's blessings to Israel in the past and the last two were about God's future promises. God clearly supervised Balaam on what to say. We see descriptions of "The Lord put a message in Balaam's mouth" (**23:5 and 16**) and "the Spirit of

God came upon him” (24:2). God evidently used Balaam as His spokesperson like a prophet of Israel. As God had intended, He used Balaam to bless Israel. Let us look at some samples of it. **Numbers 23:20-21** say: 20 “I have received a command to bless; he has blessed, and I cannot change it. 21 No misfortune is seen in Jacob, no misery observed in Israel. The Lord their God is with them; the shout of the King is among them.” God called His people from among the nations, and He purified them to become His righteous children. Israel was far from perfect. But when God was their protector, no one could harm them. We can also read **24:5-6** – 5 “How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel! 6 Like valleys they spread out, like gardens beside a river, like aloes planted by the Lord, like cedars beside the waters.” God does not only protect His people He also provides for them. Words like water and gardens picture abundance. Israel’s future would be prosperous after they settled in Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey. Toward the end, Balak did not hear any curse on Israel that he paid for. When money was all Balak got but he could not buy what he wanted, then the result was hopelessness. The business was thus called off. Balaam was free to go. He did not even get any mileage reimbursement for the trip. He learned that the God of Israel was real. No power could take away the blessings Jehovah had promised for His people. In Christ, we are God’s beloved children. Our Great Shepherd will continue to protect us and provide for our needs when we follow His supervision in life. Jesus also told us in **John 10:28** that: “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.” Once we have accepted Jesus into our hearts as our Savior and Lord, we have an eternal relationship with Him. Our life is secured in Christ. There is no bigger force that can take us away from God. What a blessed promise! God never guarantees every one of us a trouble-free, wealthy and long life. But He will watch over us and guide our path.

## CONCLUSION

God can turn a curse in our lives into blessing. No one could remove the blessing God had reserved for Israel. Notice that God’s people had no idea that Balak had a wicked scheme to hurt them. But God watched their back. He even used a pagan like Balaam to reiterate His promises to the Israelites. Today, we become God’s righteous people by faith. It is all because of God’s grace. He chose us and saved us. Those whom God intends to bless, no one can curse. You may think that you are less fortunate than others. You believe that you are not as smart, wealthy, successful, well-educated or good-looking as your peers. But if you have Jesus Christ, then you already have the biggest blessing in this life. This blessing is priceless because Jesus paid a huge price on our behalf. **Galatians 3:13-14** say: 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.” 14 He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit. The law represents God’s universal and perfect requirement for the mankind. It does not just apply to the Jews. Since no one can attain God’s standard by his/her own effort, every person is destined for eternal condemnation. But Jesus Christ took the curse we deserve and paid the penalty of our sins on the cross. Thus, all those who accept Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord are forgiven. We as Christians are blessed because Jesus was cursed. That is the gospel we receive.