

FGBC: In Light of Last Days: Donkey Talk

2 Peter 2:10b-22

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So what's wrong with the world? I was one of the nice guys in high school. I was polite and kind and it used to vex me greatly that the girls always went after the idiots. Anybody else notice that? What's wrong with the world?

The other day I was stuck in traffic on highway 97 approaching 5th Ave where they were doing some paving. There was a sign that said only use the left lane so I did, but everyone else "innocently" missed the sign and cut in front. I was there 5 whole minutes before I got through. That's terrible traffic in PG. What's wrong with the world?

This last week a young man overdosed behind our church. My wife, Nikki, and couple others went to help and they found the guy blue unable to breathe. And Nikki threw her better judgment aside and gave him mouth to mouth before the ambulance arrived. And he lived. But not everyone who gets CPR does. All week Nikki's been having flashbacks of being beside Nathan Warren, a godly young man who died of a heart aneurism right beside her while the paramedics worked. What's wrong with our world?

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Alright, go ahead and grab your Bible and open to 2nd Peter 2. It's almost at the end of the Bible. We will be picking it up in the second half of verse 10 today.

Peter's got some ideas about what is wrong with the world in this text. If you were here last week you know he's on a bit of a rant. Somebody did something to his cornflakes, and he is letting them have it. That's what all of chapter 2 is all about.

But before we jump into that let me set the context so we don't get lost. In chapter 1 Peter gives us an encouraging challenge to make every effort to confirm our call and election. His point is, you can know you are saved. This isn't a guessing game. You don't have to wonder whether you've been good enough for God – you can have an assurance of your salvation.

So how do you know? Peter says people know this when they are making every effort to live for God's glory.

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Now when I hear that I want to confess to you that my first instinct is to be nervous because I lost my temper at my kids this morning, and yesterday I struggled with the temptation to indulge lustful fantasy and the day before that I was speaking without thinking and hurting people with my words.

And the truth is that in at least some of those moments I could have made more effort than I did. How about you? Are you aware of imperfections within yourself? Does this ever make you nervous about where you stand with God?

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Peter wants us to make sure we are right with God, but it's important to note exactly what he says. Peter doesn't say look at your life and see if you've made every effort. If he said that it would be about works salvation and nobody would measure up. None of us have been good enough for God. But that isn't the Bible's message.

Hear this, God does expect perfection from you, but if you've put your trust in Jesus; if you are someone who accepts Jesus' offer of salvation, then the Father gets the perfection He demands from you from Jesus. Jesus clothes you in His righteousness. That's grace, and that's the great news of scripture! So my gut instinct is wrong when I first hear Peter's call to make every effort to confirm my election. It isn't about whether I've done enough, Jesus has done what needs doing on my behalf.

But, just milliseconds after that reaction I have another. And that is apathetic laziness. If Jesus has me covered then I'm good. So sure I know I should be more patient with my kids, but Jesus is going to forgive me anyway so I won't worry too much about it. And yes my eyes have a tendency to wander but hey, relax. I'm forgiven so I'm not going to have any guilt. And yes, sometimes my words get the best of me. I wish they didn't, but it's just who I am.

My first response is worrying whether I've done enough and my second response is lazy apathy. If you haven't signed the "I can't believe my pastor is such a sinner" petition you should get on that pretty quick.

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But seriously, there are questions in this for me, and maybe you're asking them too. It's obvious to me that something's wrong with the world and I want to know what that is, but even more than that I want to know if I'm saved? Because let's face it, I'm broken. I keep doing what I don't want to do, and the things I want, I don't do. Is that your story?

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Well, there are answers within our text today but its not going to look that way at first. Let me read it for you. We'll pick it up in 2nd Peter 2, halfway through verse 10. Peter's talking about false teachers who encourage people not to worry about holiness, particularly sexual holiness. That's where we left off last week.

[Read 2 Peter 2:10b-22]

My goodness! What do you do with a text like that?

Now last week we dealt with the call to sexual holiness, if you missed it you can look it up online. Today I want to focus on the reference to Balaam in verses 15 and 16 because if we get this wrong there is a change we will fall under the judgment of verses 20 and 21 – it could be worse off for us than if we had never encountered Christ. That's got to be one of the most terrible verses in scripture.

And so here is what Peter wants. He wants us to leave knowing that our faith is legitimate. So if you want this, turn your attention to Balaam.

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Now if you went to Sunday school you probably know who Balaam was – he’s this prophet who talks to his ass. Don’t look at me funny, this is in the Bible. But if you’ve ever actually read the story in Numbers you may have noticed that there are all sorts of parts left out of the Sunday school version.

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So here’s the context: Israel has come out of Egypt and is heading into the Promised Land. And God is giving them victory, and Moab is next on the war path. So the king of Moab, a guy named Balak, hires Balaam to curse Israel. And Balaam was obviously good at his trade because Balak sends an envoy 650 kilometers to find him.

And when they arrive they ask Balaam to help them out and they get a funny response from this pagan sorcerer. Balaam tells them he needs to talk to YHWH about their request. And when he prays God tells him “forget it, I’m not doing that.” And so Balaam tells them:

“Go on home! The LORD will not let me go with you.... Even if Balak were to give me his palace filled with silver and gold, I would be powerless to do anything against the will of the LORD my God. (Numbers 22:13;18)

Balaam says YHWH is his God, and his answer sounds solid. And so the servants return to the king, but he sends them right back with more money and more distinguished officials to gain Balaam’s support.

And so Balaam again says, let me pray about this. And we read:

That night God came to Balaam and told him, “Since these men have come for you, get up and go with them. But do only what I tell you to do.”

So the next morning Balaam got up, saddled his donkey, and started off with the Moabite officials. But God was angry that Balaam was going, so He sent the angel of the LORD to stand in the road to block his way. (Numbers 22:20-22)

Now Sunday school always made this very simple, but there is lots of debate about this verse. It turns out this is about how what appears on the outside isn’t always what is on the inside. But more on that later.

What we get is God affirming Balaam’s desire to go and then coming to oppose him. And the word “block his way” here is the Hebrew word “satan.” The angel of the Lord becomes Balaam’s satan, his adversary. I don’t remember that from Sunday school.

Anyway, the angel is ironically invisible to the seer, but the donkey knows he’s there, and so it turns off the road into a field. Well Balaam’s ticked and so beats his ass and gets going again. Well, the angel comes again, this time in a spot where the road is narrow so the donkey tries to get around it by crushing Balaam’s foot against the wall. Balaam’s not pleased with this either.

Finally the angel comes a third time and the donkey lays down and refuses to move no matter how hard Balaam beats him. And that's when Balaam starts having a conversation with his... donkey.

The donkey asks him "Why are you beating me?"

And Balaam just starts talking back: "Because you've made a fool out of me. You're lucky I've only got a stick, if I had a sword you'd be dead."

And the donkey retorts: "You've been riding me a long time, have I ever done this before?"

"No" Balaam responds. And then God opens Balaam's eyes and he sees the angel who does have a sword. And the angel tells him how he was just about to kill him and save his ass at the same time. This is all in the Bible, I'm not making any of this up.

Here is how Balaam responds:

Then Balaam confessed to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned. I didn't realize you were standing in the road to block my way. I will return home if you are against my going."

But the angel of the LORD told Balaam, "Go with these men, but say only what I tell you to say." So Balaam went on with Balak's officials. (Numbers 22:34-35)

Again Balaam looks good. It's hard to fault a guy for being angry with a donkey that won't go. I mean we are pretty removed from using animals as transportation but put yourself here. God told you, you could go. You can't see the angel. Your donkey is losing his marbles. And you've got a stick. What do you do?

Anyway the angel's not happy with Balaam for beating his donkey and repeats His command "Go, but only say exactly what I tell you." And this is what Balaam does. Seven times he stands in front of king Balak and blesses Israel instead of cursing them.

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Now, as you can imagine Balak isn't and so sends the prophet home with no reward.

In the next chapter there is a plague that kills 24000 Israelites, but there is no reference to Balaam. The story just ends.

So what do we do with this? I mean it sounds like a story about how a talking donkey turns the heart of a would-be profiteer into the willing mouthpiece of God.

But that's not what happened. And we know this because of what the rest of the Bible says about Balaam. So in our passage today Peter says these false teachers "eyes never stop committing adultery, they are experts in greed like Balaam who loved the wages of wickedness." That's a pretty harsh charge.

Jude says about the same thing, and the Apostle John warns the church of Pergamum: You tolerate some among you whose teaching is like that of Balaam, who showed Balak how to trip up the people of Israel. He taught them to sin by eating food offered to idols and by committing sexual sin. (Revelations 2:14)

What!? That wasn't in the story! Except that it was. It just didn't get recorded other than in two verses later in Numbers. In chapter 31 Moses chastises the officers of his army saying:

"Why have you let all the women [in Moab] live?... These are the very ones who followed Balaam's advice and caused the people of Israel to rebel against the LORD at Mount Peor. They are the ones who caused the plague to strike the LORD's people. (Numbers 31:15-16)

So this is what actually happened. While Balaam looked great it turns out he was in it for money all along, and he was never a willing mouthpiece of God. God spoke through him like He spoke through his donkey – Balaam really was not able to curse Israel though he would have been happy to do it. He really wanted the reward.

But on his way home, he got to thinking – and here I'm extrapolating – God won't let me curse Israel, but if I can get them to sin they will end up cursing themselves. And so he returned to Balak and told him to get his young women to invite the Israelite men out for a feast at Mt Peor. And the feast involved worshiping at their temple and temple worship in Moab involved ritual sex. Moab seduced Israel away from living holy for YHWH and into bed with Baal.

And like a lamb to the slaughter the Israelite men responded. And in Numbers 25, just after the Balaam story, we read about this encounter. Israel's men are sleeping with the Moabite women and God sends a plague that wipes out 24,000 of them. Phinehas ends up stopping the plague by grabbing a spear and running two people through who are blatantly in the act – it's another crazy story. But Balaam had figured out how to get God to curse Israel.

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Now I said at the beginning we had two questions which were going to come together: "what's wrong with the world" and "I'm a sinner, so how can I know if I'm making every effort to confirm my election?" And we said that Balaam's story answers these questions.

Now sexual immorality is the context for both texts. This is what Peter's talking about in chapter 2, and that's what Balaam used to entice Israel. But sex isn't the problem with the world, and it wasn't Balaam's problem either. It's something way more dangerous and something we are all at risk of. And it's the donkey that brings this out.

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So Balaam's mad, the donkey isn't going where he is supposed to be going, and then all of a sudden Balaam has a divine encounter. His donkey miraculously starts talking. Now this isn't Narnia, there are only two accounts of animals speaking in scripture, this one and the snake in the garden. Both are charged accounts.

But the thing we notice here is that Balaam has inoculated himself against God. When the miraculous shows up in his life he is utterly un-phased so instead of amazement and faith he just enters what might be an average conversation with a donkey – that's key. It isn't until the angel appears and Balaam realizes he could die that he hits the ground.

You see Balaam has no reverence for God. He is self-possessed and interested in the Balak's reward. He's made his living as a sorcerer and this means he feels he has some level of control over the supernatural. After all he has managed to get other gods to do his bidding. And YHWH is next on his list.¹

And this means he is so blinded by himself and his desires that when the God of the universe shows up in his life saying "Wake up Balaam, I'm here. Can't you see Me?" Balaam the seer doesn't see anything.

And here is where this reaches home. Friends, God is at work in our world. He's working in your life and our city all the time. The question is do you see Him?

So on Friday this week I was struggling to put this message together. 2nd Peter 2, if you've ever preached, is a very difficult text. And as I was staring at it not knowing where we were going to go a friend from church walked into my office.

Now I love chatting with this guy, but on Friday I'll confess my initial thought was "oh no, here's a distraction. I need to concentrate if I'm going to figure this out." But Somebody else knew I wasn't getting anywhere fast and sent this friend with a conversation that lead me to heart of this text. My friend started talking about whether he had real faith because of how hard it is to see God at work. And this is the problem with Balaam. He can't even see God when animals are talking. And I hadn't noticed that before my friend arrived.

Now you can say "That's a coincidence" or whatever but I'm telling you I was stuck and didn't know where to go. I'm not sure if you've ever had to speak in front of 100 people before and not known what to say, but it's not my favorite place to be. But Jesus is faithful and He showed up in my need with a word for His church. And I'm blown away that God would bend down into my struggle to help. Thank you Jesus.

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¹ Thought adapted from Richard Ritenbaugh <https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Topical.show/RTD/cgg/ID/2089/Balaam.htm> (Accessed August 10, 2019)

Friends, here's the question Balaam puts before us: what have you done with your God encounters? When God has shown Himself to you have you treated these encounters as no big deal, or have you relished them? Do you pour out thanks and praise, or have you fallen into the practice of talking to your ass like it's no big deal?

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In Luke 17 Jesus comes across 10 lepers on the outskirts of town. And these men encounter the power of God. Now all ten are excited about the gift they've received. But only one connects the dots and loves Jesus. Only one tunes his heart to thanksgiving and falls at Jesus' feet. The other nine were as blind as Balaam.

Here's the take away: This is God's world and He's active in it. If you are someone who says "I wish God would show up in my life in powerful ways, you're missing something because He is showing up in your life. His fingerprints are all over. So think about how it is that you find yourself here today. Life is a journey of a thousand steps and none of this is an accident. The God of the universe is orchestrating your reality in search of your soul. But the question is what do you do when you catch a glimpse of His fingerprints? Do you care? Do you make every effort to pay attention when the God of the universe takes time to show up in your life?

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About 5 years ago I started keeping a journal of instances where God shows up in my life. And I do this as an exercise of remembrance because I've recognized that I can encounter the God of the universe – I can actually see Him stepping into my reality and then the next day I can pick up and carry on as though nothing has happened. Does that ever happen to you?

Friends, there is something wrong with the world, but it isn't external. The problem isn't politics or poverty or bad drivers or temptation. The problem is our sinful hearts.

Each one of us has a propensity to encounter God and treat Him as no big deal. This is the story of Israel. Didn't they see the power of God and yet continually fall apart? This is the story of Balaam. A man with incredible insight and yet equally great blindness.

And this is what separates those with real faith from the rest. God reaches out to all of us, and those with real faith love Him in return. But this love isn't just something that happens. If you're married you know that love takes effort – at least if you're happily married you know this. And similarly those who have encountered Jesus and have real faith know they have to make every effort to confirm their election. We are saved by grace, but we respond with love. This is where salvation lies.