

MARCH 16

I know I've said a lot (too much?) about St. Pat's Day, but the reason for this is to have a motivational point to look forward to. Use things like dates and events to help motivate yourself to do something, lose a pound or keep up with reading The One Year Bible. Set your own goals; find dates that are meaningful to you and not so far off and celebrate when you get there. Celebrate when you finish any and every book of the Bible. It is no small thing to be reading through the Word of God. It is the most important thing any person could ever do, and very few people, even Christians, will ever do it. But the real goal in this is to sit with the Lord, to hear Him and learn to understand Him.

Numbers 24-25

One of the little evidences of the truth of God's Word is that if it were simply the national literature of Israel, they would never have included these stories. National literature doesn't air a people's darkest details to this degree. If, on the other hand, the Bible is the record of God dealing with man to bring him redemption, this all makes sense. Israel is given the distinction of becoming a picture of mankind, of every man and woman. They will later be honored for this; but until then, we see, through them, how we would all respond to God. We who know Him are only different, because we were redeemed out of death by the blood of Christ and have been given the Spirit to break the power of sin. Still, even with the Lord and the Spirit, we struggle. Without them, we'd be toast, like Israel.

Numbers 24

Vs. 1-2 It seems that Balaam's intent was to look at Israel to find signs that would lead him to curse them. When he realized now that God would only bless them and understood God's love for Israel, apparently, his heart opened and the Spirit came upon him. This doesn't mean Balaam was a believer or following God any more than when this happened to King Saul, Caiaphas, or the donkey.

Vs. 3-9 From Balaam's vantage, high above the plain, the camp of Israel must have looked impressive. These seem to be the words of God. Notice in them the affection of God for Israel. Notice too in v. 9 that this is part of the blessing spoken to Abraham. Although the people were under the covenant with Moses, even above that was God's promise to Abraham for the blessing of all nations, and above that was the promise to Adam and Eve that there would be a redeemer.

Somewhere, too, we should remember that Israel had been camped out and living in the desert for 40 years at this point. This means they were a well-known people group and some of their history might have been known.

Vs. 10-11 Balak finally loses it and tries to rub it in that God has kept Balaam from getting rich. At this point Balaam still looks like a nice guy, but he hasn't given up on cashing in. He still has an ace to play.

Vs. 12-24 At v. 14, Balaam gives an overview of what will eventually happen in the future. The star and scepter of v. 17 could be David, in the nearer future, but eventually this will be Jesus at His second advent. The ships of Kittim are often thought to be from Rome and are mentioned again in Daniel, almost certainly meaning the growing Roman Empire.

V. 25 Balaam went home and the job was done. He passes out of the narrative, but you'll be surprised where he turns up.

Numbers 25

Vs. 1-5 To some part of the camp, the locals came and said, "Hey, let's get to know each other. Let's have a grill party!" Finally, something other than manna. During the meal it was apparent that it was a feast to another god, and not just any god. It was Baal, the god that, among other things, brought fertility to people and to the fields. When you bowed down to Baal it was sexual. They used male and female cult prostitutes. To "yoke" themselves was to engage sexually in Baal worship. Apparently the men were easy and willing targets.

Vs. 4-5 show the extreme measures that Moses took. At first this looks simply like punishing the guilty who participated in this religious orgy. You notice that there were prominent men involved. But actually these measures by Moses were meant to stop the growing plague of death that began sweeping through the camp. Balaam couldn't curse the people, but these Midianites found a way to entice the people to bring themselves under God's wrath. It was working.

Vs. 6-15 Even though they had killed some of the leaders involved in this worship, who were consequently responsible for the plague that was sweeping the camp, the plague went on; and Moses, the priests and the elders were stunned and didn't know what to do. They were gathered at the entrance of the *tent of meeting*, but they were helpless. Then they all see a guy take a woman of Midian into his tent. They weren't going to have coffee together. Everyone sees this bold defiance, but no one moves. Suddenly, Phinehas sees the connection between the growing cry of death in the camp and this man and woman. He grabs a spear and sprints through the camp to this tent, and in one stroke he impales them both into the floor of the tent.

The plague instantly stopped. In those hours of sin and confusion, 23,000 died (Paul says 23,000 fell in a single day), and in the next days, another thousand died. Somehow there were scars or some sort of visible disease that was connected to this that Phinehas will refer to at the end of the book of Joshua.

Vs. 10-13 God makes a perpetual covenant with Phinehas. Here is the deal. Phinehas saw the connection between the sin and the death it was bringing, and he took action that brought peace. Therefore, it is a *covenant of peace*. The ministry of the priest was to bring peace between the people and God. I like what God says, *he was jealous with my jealousy*.

Vs. 16-18 God promises a fight, though it doesn't happen until chapter 31. If you want to look over chapter 31, you'll find Balaam's name at least twice. Notice here, the mention of *wiles* and *beguiled* in v. 18. There was careful, intentional planning that went on here. In chapter 31 we'll see that this plan came from Balaam.

Back to Phinehas. I really like this guy. As disciples, we do this in a similar way. We are to be passionate with Christ's passion, living as He lived, willing to die as He died, to bring the message of salvation to lost people. King Josiah had this passion for his people who were about to be taken into exile. *Because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the LORD, when you heard how I spoke against this place and against its inhabitants, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and you have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, declares the LORD.* (2 Kings 22:19)

God has promised to bless our work in the harvest, but we need to be passionate with His passion and compassion. Jesus is our Lord and He is our model. We are His disciples to be like Him and to follow Him.

Luke 2:1-35

One thing not to lose sight of is that in the words of both Mary and Zechariah, the promise to Abraham is spoken of. This is not an "Israel" thing going on, although for purposes of heralding the message, Israel was chosen. This is world redemption going on, beginning with Adam and Eve. Abraham would have had firsthand knowledge of the promise since he probably knew Noah or Shem and Noah's father knew Adam. When I was working on a freight dock, this guy asked me why God was a Jew. The answer is simple. God chose a man, not a nation or ethnic group. Today, Abraham would have been an Iraqi. God made a nation to herald the truth. They failed once, but they'll get it right next time. In the meantime, we're on.

Vs. 1-7 No one pinpoints dates like Luke does. This would have had a lot of meaning to Theophilus and the other Gentiles who read this. Luke's detail here and in Acts adds a ton of credibility to what he is writing.

V. 4 It is interesting to think that a Roman king would have such a harebrained idea to make everyone go to the city that their ancestors came from. But he did and God used it. Sometimes it's good just to obey and trust that God is working in the confusion.

V. 5 Luke identifies Mary as Joseph's betrothed, although Matthew says wife. They had not consummated the relationship, so though they were legally married, the relationship hadn't been

"formally" begun. Luke may have been coming from a more Gentile perspective. He would have gotten all this information from Mary.

During this time of registering, the city would have been full. We'll see in a few verses that Joe and Mary were not alone, and although they were in the stable, it may have been that the innkeepers were taking care of all of their guests, including their guests, and the baby, in the stable.

Vs. 8-14 There is much debate about the time of Jesus' birth. We really don't know, but you can't use the argument that in winter they didn't have flocks around Bethlehem and Jerusalem. We know from the OT that there were morning and evening sacrifices every day and there were plenty of sacrifices in between. They would have kept large flocks around Jerusalem all year round. Bethlehem was only about 7.5 miles from Jerusalem and it was a popular place to keep flocks.

Vs. 15-20 It is interesting that Mary usually gets first billing. Matthew says more about Joseph being spoken to in dreams. Probably because Mary was still alive at the time of this writing and known in the church, she is given prominence. And besides, she was Jesus' mum.

V. 18 Notice that there were others present. We often picture the stable as being a lonely dark place, but I think this stable was being used for many guests. I doubt that there was a little kid with a drum.

Notice that Mary kept rolling these things through her mind and heart. That worked out good for Luke. And the shepherds went back rejoicing.

Vs. 22-24 We have read about these laws in the OT. Cool, huh? Notice that Joseph and Mary offer the sacrifice for poor people, but not the extremely poor. They hadn't yet been visited by the wise men, who brought gifts that made the poor couple fairly well-to-do and financed their escape and stay in Egypt.

Vs. 25-35 Simeon is a great guy. Notice the references to the Spirit. Notice also the mention of salvation to the Gentiles. This would have been an important verse in the early church. Luke, again, would have gotten this from Mary.

Notice that Jesus will be *a sign that is opposed....so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed*. A person's response to Jesus reveals their hearts. Paul says this in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16, *But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?*

As disciples we have to be willing to get the Word out there to give people the chance to respond. How they respond is not up to us. What we don't want is to be afraid of identifying with our Lord and having the sword pass through our own souls. I know my own fear, and Paul had to tell Timothy not to be afraid.

Psalm 59

This is sort of funny. "Hey, guys, what melody should I use for this song?" "I don't know. Why don't we go with "Do Not Destroy"? I wonder if it had heavy percussion.

It is hard for us in the western world to really grasp having a powerful enemy. How do you get trained in focusing on the Lord, other than being so overwhelmed by oppression and threat that you learn to bend your mind and heart to the Lord. Look at v. 16. The flow of this psalm is very reminiscent of the flow of Psalm 119, David's masterpiece.

The Psalms are an easy place for you to train your mind to look for the changing of thoughts and seeing how the Spirit and the psalmist are laying out this plea for help and praise of God.

Vs. 1-5 David cries for help against these enemies and asks God to look at the situation and to judge. The "selah" isn't always there, but it does give you an idea here where the thought breaks.

Vs. 6-7 This is an "artsy" sort of refrain.

Vs. 8-10 This is David's confidence and trust in the Lord. My heart latches on to these references to God being our *fortress* and being met by *his steadfast love*.

Vs. 11-13 This is an interesting wrinkle in asking for God's judgment. David wanted God to judge them in such a way that the people would see that King Saul and his leaders were wrong. This is exactly what happened. As Saul chased David and rejected God, the nation went down the tubes. Saul's life was not happy and his legacy was horrible.

Vs. 14-15 This is the repeating of the refrain from above. It sounds better in German, but it would sound similar in English if it were written, "howling like the hounds."

Vs. 16-17 And again, David's confidence is in God, who hides him in His *fortress* and shows David His faithful, *steadfast love*.

Proverbs 11:14

The Lord is telling us to stay connected to lots of *counselors* at all times, assuming the counselors love the Lord.