

Homiletics Analysis: Numbers 22

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Numbers 22 opens the Balaam cycle (chapters 22–24), one of the most theologically rich and literarily distinctive episodes in the Pentateuch. Israel has completed its wilderness campaigns and is encamped on the plains of Moab, east of the Jordan. Balak, king of Moab, is terrified by what Israel has done to the Amorites and sends to Pethor in Mesopotamia for Balaam son of Beor, a diviner of regional reputation, to come and curse Israel. The LORD intervenes immediately: He forbids Balaam to go, for Israel is blessed. Balak sends a second, more prestigious delegation with a blank-check offer of honor and reward. Balaam protests his integrity while visibly straining toward the money. God permits him to go with the condition that he speak only what God tells him. En route, the Angel of the LORD stands in the road with a drawn sword — invisible to Balaam but visible to his donkey, who turns aside three times and is struck three times by Balaam. The donkey speaks, rebuking Balaam; the Angel appears; Balaam confesses his sin and offers to turn back. The Angel permits him to continue, repeating the condition: speak only what I tell you. Balaam arrives in Moab, is received by Balak, and is taken to Bamoth-baal to view a portion of Israel. The chapter sets up everything that follows but is itself a complete theological episode: God controls access to His people, exposes the corrupt condition of the man He is using, and demonstrates that no power — political, financial, or supernatural — can override His blessing of Israel.

This Text — Intent

God's intent through Numbers 22 is to produce in the reader an unshakeable confidence that His covenant people are beyond the reach of their enemies' curses, schemes, and hired power — not because Israel is strong, but because God is sovereignly committed to His own blessing of them. Simultaneously, the passage confronts the reader with the portrait of Balaam: a man who knows God's word, speaks God's word, and yet is fundamentally driven by greed and self-advancement — a diagnostic mirror for anyone who handles sacred things with impure motives. God intends both to assure the reader of His inviolable protection of His people and to expose the danger of being near-to-God in knowledge while far-from-God in the heart.

Subject Sentence: God's sovereign blessing of Israel cannot be purchased, redirected, or overridden by any human or spiritual power.

Primary Claim: God is assuring His people that every scheme against them — however well-funded, politically powerful, or supernaturally resourced — is already defeated before it begins, because He alone controls what is spoken over them; and He is warning every Balaam in every generation that proximity to divine revelation is not the same as integrity before the divine Revealer.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Nature and Identity of Balaam

The most significant interpretive question in Numbers 22 is how to evaluate Balaam himself. Three broad readings compete. First, the *sympathetic reading* treats Balaam as a genuinely pious non-Israelite prophet who sincerely serves the LORD, whose only fault is the final apostasy of Numbers 31:16 — on this reading, chapters 22–24 present him as largely admirable. Second, the *straightforwardly corrupt reading* treats Balaam as a false prophet and mercenary diviner from the outset, whose surface-level piety is pure performance covering naked greed — this is the reading of the New Testament (2 Peter 2:15–16; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14) and most of the Old Testament references. Third, a *complex reading* holds that Balaam genuinely receives and speaks divine revelation while simultaneously being motivated by greed — a man who is, in the precise terms of the text, both used by God and judged by God.

The Reformed reading affirms the third position while insisting that the New Testament's verdict controls the canonical evaluation. The text itself generates the tension: Balaam repeatedly protests his integrity ("I cannot go beyond the word of the LORD my God"), yet he keeps asking — twice — whether God might change His mind when more money is on the table. The donkey episode is not incidental: God opens the mouth of an animal to rebuke a prophet who should know better, a deliberate humiliation exposing the gap between Balaam's claimed devotion and his actual condition. The Angel's indictment — "your way is perverse before me" (v. 32) — is God's own verdict on Balaam in this chapter. The sympathetic reading cannot account for this language. The straightforwardly corrupt reading cannot account for the genuine revelatory content of chapters 23–24. The complex reading accounts for both and is corroborated by the New Testament's use of "the way of Balaam" and "the error of Balaam" as stock categories for religious professionals whose doctrine is orthodox and whose hearts are mercenary.

The Talking Donkey: Literal or Figurative?

Some traditions read the donkey episode as visionary or figurative — a prophetic dream sequence rather than a literal event. This reading is motivated partly by rationalist commitments and partly by a desire to smooth the narrative. The Reformed reading is that the text presents this as a literal, historical event and that this presentation is intentional: the miracle is specifically designed to humiliate Balaam by using an animal to deliver divine correction that Balaam himself should have been receptive to. The New Testament

treats it as literal (2 Peter 2:16: “a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet’s madness”). The figurative reading is acknowledged only to the degree that it surfaces the genuine strangeness of the passage — God working through unexpected and even scandalous instruments — but it is refuted as the governing interpretation.

The Angel of the LORD

Some traditions read “the Angel of the LORD” throughout Numbers 22 as a created angelic messenger. The Reformed reading, consistent with the broader pattern of Theophanic Angel appearances in the Old Testament (Genesis 16, 22; Exodus 3; Joshua 5), identifies this figure as a pre-incarnate appearance of the Second Person of the Trinity — the divine Messenger who carries the full authority and speaks the first-person words of the LORD Himself. The drawn sword (v. 23) connects directly to the Commander of the LORD’s army in Joshua 5:13–15, suggesting the same figure appears in both episodes at the moment of Israel’s entry into the land. This identification is not certain from this passage alone but is consistent with the canonical pattern and carries significant weight for Reformed exposition.

The Permissive Will of God

The sequence of God saying “do not go” (v. 12), then “you may go” (v. 20), troubles some readers, and some traditions use this apparent reversal to argue for an open or dynamic view of God’s will — as if God changed His mind in response to Balaam’s persistence. The Reformed reading holds that God’s permissive will here is itself the expression of His sovereign purpose: He permits Balaam to go precisely so that His own word may go forth through Balaam’s mouth in the presence of Israel’s enemies. The permission is not capitulation; it is strategy. God was never going to let Israel be cursed — the permission to travel is not permission to curse. The conditions (“only do what I tell you”) establish from the outset that Balaam’s mouth will be under divine control regardless of Balak’s commission.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 12:3** — “I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse.” The Abrahamic covenant is the theological ground for everything in Numbers 22–24. Balak’s attempt to curse Israel is an attempt to override the foundational covenant promise; God’s protection of Israel in the Balaam cycle is the covenant operating exactly as promised.
- **2 Peter 2:15–16** — Peter explicitly invokes “the way of Balaam, who loved gain from wrongdoing, and was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet’s madness.” The New Testament’s canonical verdict on Balaam controls the evaluation of Numbers 22 and confirms the complex-but-ultimately-corrupt reading.

- **Jude 11** — “Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam’s error.” Jude groups “Balaam’s error” with Abel-murder and Korah-rebellion as paradigm cases of fatal apostasy — confirming that Balaam’s final condition is not neutral but catastrophically wrong.
- **Joshua 24:9–10** — Joshua rehearses the Balaam episode in his covenant-renewal address: “Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and fought against Israel. And he sent and invited Balaam the son of Beor to curse you, but I refused to listen to Balaam. Indeed, he blessed you.” God’s refusal to allow the curse becomes a pillar of Israel’s history of salvation — something to be rehearsed and rested on.
- **Revelation 2:14** — The risen Christ warns the church at Pergamum against those who “hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel.” The “doctrine of Balaam” becomes a New Testament category for corrupting God’s people from within through compromise — demonstrating that Balaam’s influence extends beyond Numbers into the ongoing life of the church.

Aim: To ground the reader’s security in God’s inviolable commitment to bless His covenant people, and to expose the self-deception of those who serve God with their lips while their hearts are governed by other masters.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
22:1	Israel camps on the plains of Moab, east of the Jordan opposite Jericho	Geographical marker — Israel is at the threshold of the land; the wilderness is behind them
22:2–3	Balak, king of Moab, sees what Israel did to the Amorites; Moab is in dread	“Was overcome with fear” — Israel’s victories are generating the geopolitical crisis Balak is responding to
22:4	Balak enlists the elders of Midian; describes Israel as licking up everything around them “as the ox licks up the grass of the field”	Coalition-building; the ox metaphor emphasizes unstoppable consuming force
22:5–6	Balak sends to Pethor for Balaam son of Beor; frames the request — “curse this people for me since they are	The logic of cursing as a military strategy; Balak acknowledges he cannot prevail by force and turns to

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	too mighty for me; perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land”	supernatural means
22:7	Elders of Moab and Midian travel with divination fees in hand	“Fees for divination” — establishes from the outset that this is a financial transaction; Balaam is a professional
22:8	Balaam invites them to stay the night; he will bring back what the LORD tells him	Balaam invokes the LORD (YHWH) — unusual for a non-Israelite; he appears to function as a genuine recipient of divine communication
22:9–12	God comes to Balaam at night; God’s question: “Who are these men with you?” Balaam explains. God’s verdict: “You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed”	God’s sovereign declaration — Israel’s blessed status is the reason, not their strength; the blessing precedes any cursing attempt
22:13	Balaam sends the officials away: “The LORD has refused to let me go with you”	Accurate but selective — Balaam reports the refusal without reporting God’s reason (Israel is blessed)
22:14–17	Balak sends a larger, more prestigious delegation; ups the offer: “I will do you great honor... whatever you say to me I will do”	Escalation — Balak interprets the initial refusal as negotiating rather than definitive; he increases both the social pressure and the financial offer
22:18	Balaam’s response: “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the LORD my God to do less or more”	Correct theology, suspicious context — Balaam says the right thing, but the fact that he is comparing his obedience to a “house full of silver and gold” reveals what is being weighed
22:19	Balaam invites the delegation to stay again:	The fatal crack — God has already spoken clearly;

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	“that I may know what more the LORD will say to me”	there is nothing “more” to find out; Balaam is seeking divine permission to do what he already wants to do
22:20	God comes again: “If the men have come to call you, rise, go with them; but only do what I tell you”	Permissive will — God permits the journey under condition; this is not divine capitulation but divine strategy
22:21	Balaam saddles his donkey and goes with the princes of Moab	The narrative moves quickly — Balaam wastes no time
22:22	“God’s anger was kindled because he went” — Angel of the LORD stands in the road as adversary	Tension: God gave permission, yet God’s anger burns. The permission was not approval. Balaam’s motivation is the issue.
22:23	The donkey sees the Angel with drawn sword; turns into the field; Balaam strikes the donkey	Three-part pattern begins: donkey sees / donkey avoids / Balaam beats
22:24–25	Angel stands in the narrow path between vineyards; donkey presses against the wall, crushing Balaam’s foot; Balaam strikes again	Escalating confinement — the path narrows, the options narrow, the situation worsens
22:26–27	Angel moves to a place with no room to turn; donkey lies down; Balaam strikes a third time with his staff	Complete immobilization — Balaam cannot proceed; his response is rage
22:28	LORD opens the donkey’s mouth; donkey speaks: “What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?”	The miracle — an animal rebukes a prophet; the divine word comes through the most unlikely channel imaginable
22:29	Balaam answers the donkey — without shock — “Because you have made a fool of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I	Balaam’s murderous rage and his non-reaction to the speaking donkey are both significant; he is too angry to be amazed; he wants to kill

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
22:30	would kill you" Donkey appeals to its track record: "Have I been in the habit of treating you this way?" Balaam: "No"	the creature God is using The donkey makes a reasoned argument and Balaam concedes the point — a prophet out-argued by his beast
22:31	LORD opens Balaam's eyes; he sees the Angel with drawn sword; he falls on his face	The reversal — now Balaam sees what the donkey saw; prostration replaces rage
22:32–33	Angel's rebuke: "Your way is perverse before me. The donkey turned aside to save your life; otherwise I would have killed you and let her live"	God's verdict on Balaam — "perverse" (Hebrew: <i>yāraʿ</i> — to turn aside recklessly); the donkey was the instrument of divine mercy, not obstruction
22:34	Balaam confesses: "I have sinned, for I did not know you were standing in the road against me. Now therefore, if it is evil in your sight, I will turn back"	Partial confession — "I did not know" is technically true but spiritually thin; Balaam offers to turn back but with a conditional ("if it is evil in your sight")
22:35	Angel: "Go with the men, but speak only the word that I tell you"	Permission restated with condition — the Angel echoes God's words from v. 20; the condition is absolute
22:36–38	Balak meets Balaam at the border; expresses frustration at the delay; Balaam immediately establishes: "I have no power to say anything. The word that God puts in my mouth, that must I speak"	Arrival scene — Balaam has been humiliated and shaken; he leads with the condition immediately upon meeting Balak
22:39–40	Balak takes Balaam to Kiriath-huzoth; sacrifices oxen and sheep; sends portions to Balaam and the princes	Reception — Balak lavishes hospitality; the honor and feasting are what Balaam came for
22:41	Balak takes Balaam to Bamoth-baal where he can	Setup — the chapter ends poised for the oracles of

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	see a portion of the people of Israel	chapters 23–24; Balaam is positioned to view Israel

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	22:1–6	The Enemy’s Strategy: When Force Fails, Try a Curse
2	22:7–14	The First Delegation: God Says No
3	22:15–21	The Second Delegation: God Permits the Journey
4	22:22–35	The Road: God Confronts the Man He Is Using
5	22:36–41	The Arrival: Balaam Establishes the Only Condition That Matters

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God’s sovereign blessing of Israel cannot be purchased, redirected, or overridden by any human or spiritual power.

Primary Claim: God is assuring His people that every scheme against them — however well-funded, politically powerful, or supernaturally resourced — is already defeated before it begins, because He alone controls what is spoken over them; and He is warning every Balaam in every generation that proximity to divine revelation is not the same as integrity before the divine Revealer.

Applications (Five)

1. Your enemies cannot hire what God has not authorized. [Mind/Belief] Balak’s entire strategy rests on the assumption that supernatural power is a commodity — that the right professional, paid the right price, can bend divine force against Israel. God’s refusal — “you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed” — is not a negotiating position; it is a declaration of ontological fact. The child of the covenant does not need to fear what is being said about them in rooms they cannot enter, by people who wish them harm, with resources they cannot match. The blessing is not revocable by human will or financial transaction. The application is not a feeling of safety — it is a restructuring of the

imagination: stop calculating your vulnerability by your enemies' resources and start calculating it by the covenant God has already spoken over you. Those who are in Christ have been blessed "with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 1:3) — which is to say, no curse lands.

2. The gap between what you say about God and what you actually want is the most dangerous gap in your life. [Affections/Worship] Balaam says all the right things: "I cannot go beyond the word of the LORD my God." "Though Balak gave me his house full of silver and gold." The words are impeccable. But the fact that he mentions the house full of silver and gold reveals what is being weighed on the other side of the scale. He compares his obedience to a price tag, which means he is pricing his obedience. The most dangerous spiritual condition is not rank unbelief — it is the condition of saying orthodox things while your heart's actual center of gravity is somewhere else entirely. Balaam's crisis is not intellectual; it is worship. He loves gain. The question this passage puts to the reader is not "do you know the right things about God?" but "what do you actually want most, and what would you say yes to if the offer were large enough?" Honest examination here is not comfortable, but it is the passage's intent.

3. When God says no clearly, asking again is not persistence in prayer — it is resistance to God. [Mind/Belief] God's first word to Balaam was unambiguous: "You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed." There is no interpretive difficulty in that sentence. Balaam asks again anyway — not because he misunderstood, but because he wanted a different answer. There is a form of prayer that is genuine dependence and a form of prayer that is lobbying — pressuring God to change a decision He has already made clearly, because His decision is inconvenient to what we want. This passage does not reward Balaam's persistence; it exposes it. The application is pointed: when Scripture or providential circumstances make God's direction clear, the response God is looking for is not "let me ask again with a larger delegation" but obedience. The discipline of accepting God's no as God's no — without assuming it is merely the first round of negotiation — is a mark of genuine trust.

4. God will use whatever is necessary to get your attention before you do serious damage — receive it with humility. [Will/Behavior] The donkey episode is an act of mercy. The Angel tells Balaam plainly: "The donkey turned aside to save your life; otherwise I would have killed you." What felt like an infuriating obstruction was divine protection. This pattern recurs throughout Scripture and throughout life: circumstances that frustrate your plans, people who slow you down, embarrassments that deflate your confidence — any of these may be the Angel of the LORD standing in the road because the direction you are going is perverse before Him. The behavioral application is concrete: when you are frustrated by an unexpected obstruction — particularly in a direction you know, on some level, you should not be going — stop and ask whether God is blocking the path before you beat the donkey a third time. The proud response to divine obstruction is rage and escalation. The faithful response is prostration.

5. Arrive at every place of ministry having already settled: you will say only what God has given you to say. [Will/Behavior] The most important thing Balaam says in this chapter is the first thing he says to Balak upon arrival: “I have no power to say anything. The word that God puts in my mouth, that must I speak.” He has been humiliated into this position — it took a talking donkey and an armed angel to get him here — but it is the right position. The principle is the pattern for every teacher, preacher, counselor, parent, elder, or anyone who speaks into another person’s life on God’s behalf: the word you carry is not yours to adjust, embellish, soften, or weaponize for personal advantage. You are a mouth. The authority is not transferable. The application is to settle this before you enter the room — not after the Angel blocks the road. What Balaam eventually got right under compulsion, the faithful minister of the word should get right by conviction.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Numbers 22 establishes that the protection of God’s covenant people is not reactive but proactive — God does not neutralize the curse after it is spoken; He prevents it from being spoken at all. This reflects the absolute sovereignty of God over all speech, including prophetic and divinatory speech: no word spoken against His people has any standing that He has not authorized. The passage also demonstrates that God accomplishes His purposes through imperfect and even corrupt instruments without being implicated in their corruption — He speaks truly through Balaam while simultaneously judging Balaam’s motives. The doctrine of divine sovereignty and the doctrine of human accountability are both fully present in the same man’s story. Finally, the Angel of the LORD episode establishes that God’s opposition to His people’s enemies is active and armed — the drawn sword is not a symbol but a statement of intent.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Numbers 22 is a vivid, narrative display of unconditional election and the perseverance of God’s covenant people — not as abstractions but as plot. Balak’s entire scheme is an attempt to do what the Reformed tradition insists cannot be done: override God’s election by outside force. The passage demonstrates what the Westminster Confession means when it says that the elect “can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace” — not because of their own strength, but because God has spoken a word over them that cannot be unsaid by any hired diviner. The Balaam portrait also carries a sharp warning for the Reformed tradition itself: doctrinal precision and fluency in divine revelation offer no protection against the “way of Balaam” — the condition of handling sacred truth for personal advancement. The gospel that secures God’s people from Balak’s curses is the same gospel that judges Balaam’s mercenary heart; both functions of the gospel must be preached from this passage.

Main Takeaway

No one can curse what God has blessed — not Balak’s silver, not Balaam’s reputation, not any political or spiritual power arrayed against you. The covenant God has already spoken the word over you, and that word is not for sale and not for revision. And if you are someone who handles God’s word for a living — or for gain — understand that proximity to revelation is not the same as faithfulness to the Revealer. God will open the mouth of a donkey before He lets His word be corrupted. Settle now whose word you are actually carrying, and for whose benefit.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the donkey episode as the sermon’s center.** The talking donkey is vivid, memorable, and tempting to develop at length — it is also a supporting instrument in a larger argument, not the theological payload. Preachers who spend the bulk of the sermon on the donkey’s speech miss the passage’s governing claim: God’s sovereign protection of His people from hostile supernatural powers. The donkey is the means; the Angel is the revelation; God’s inviolable blessing of Israel is the point.
- **Resolving the Balaam tension too quickly in either direction.** Preachers who make Balaam a hero (emphasizing his correct speech and genuine revelation) or a straightforward villain (reducing him to a greedy fraud) both fail the text. The tension is the teaching. A man can know the word of God, speak the word of God, and be on his way to destruction because his heart’s true master is money. This is one of the most uncomfortable and important things Numbers 22 says, and it cannot be preached if the tension is collapsed.
- **Applying “you can’t curse what God has blessed” without grounding it in the covenant.** This statement is true and powerful, but it only functions as gospel if the reader understands they are in the covenant — which, for New Testament readers, means they are in Christ. A preacher who applies the promise without establishing the covenantal ground produces either a false sense of security (“God has to be on my side”) or a confused sense of exclusion (“but am I really blessed?”). The application must route through the gospel: you are beyond the reach of your enemies’ curses because you are in the One who bore all curses (Galatians 3:13).
- **Missing the idol-diagnostic function of Balaam’s self-revelation.** When Balaam mentions “a house full of silver and gold,” he is not describing Balak’s offer — he is revealing his own imaginative world. What you compare your obedience to is what you are actually weighing against obedience. Preachers who pass over this detail without pressing it miss the passage’s most penetrating application to the

congregation. Most people in the pew have a number, a opportunity, or a relationship they are quietly pricing against their obedience to God's clear word.

- **Flattening God's permissive will into divine approval.** The text is careful to say that God's anger burned "because he went" even though God permitted the journey. Preachers must hold this distinction without forcing it into either an open theism framework ("God changed His mind") or a fatalistic one ("anything God permits, God approves"). God permitted Balaam to go precisely to accomplish His own purposes through the journey — which included humiliating Balaam en route and producing oracles of blessing through him in Moab. The permission is strategic, not approving.
- **Neglecting the New Testament canonical closure on Balaam.** Numbers 22–24 is not the end of the Balaam story. Numbers 31:16 records that Balaam taught Balak to seduce Israel into apostasy at Peor — the very thing chapters 23–24 would not permit him to do directly. Peter, Jude, and the risen Christ all invoke Balaam as a paradigm of catastrophic spiritual failure. An exposition of Numbers 22 that does not at least note where this man ends up leaves the congregation with an incomplete portrait and misses the canonical severity of the "way of Balaam" as a live danger.