

Homiletics Analysis: Numbers 23

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Numbers 23 records two of Balaam's four oracles delivered from the heights overlooking the camp of Israel. Commissioned by Balak king of Moab to curse the people advancing toward Canaan, Balaam instead pronounces blessing — twice. The chapter moves through a precise, repeating ritual pattern: Balak constructs altars and offers sacrifices, Balaam withdraws to seek a divine word, the LORD meets him and places a word in his mouth, and Balaam returns to pronounce oracle over a people he was hired to destroy. The first oracle (vv. 7–10) establishes the fundamental reality: Israel is a people *set apart* — dwelling alone, uncountable, impossible to curse. The second oracle (vv. 18–24) deepens the claim by grounding it in the character of God Himself — God is not a man that He should lie or change His mind; what He has said, He will do; what He has decreed, He will not reverse. The blessing stands not because Israel deserves it but because the God who declared it cannot contradict Himself. The chapter closes with Balak's frustrated attempt to relocate Balaam to a vantage point more favorable for cursing — a gesture that underscores the futility of opposing what God has sworn.

This Text — Intent

God is not merely recording an interesting episode from Israel's wilderness journey. Through Balaam's mouth — an outsider, a diviner-for-hire — God is issuing a declaration about the inviolability of His covenant word and the utter security of the people over whom it stands. The intent is to drive Israel (and every subsequent reader) past confidence in their own spiritual condition and into confidence in the faithfulness of the God who called them. Balak stands in for every power — human, spiritual, cultural — that has ever attempted to pronounce doom over God's covenant people. The answer given here is not "Israel is impressive" but "the God who blessed them cannot be made to lie." This is meant to produce settled, unshakeable assurance — not because the reader is worthy, but because the One who promised is incapable of reversal.

Subject Sentence: The LORD's blessing over His people stands because God Himself cannot lie or change.

Primary Claim: God is compelling His people to rest their security not in their own condition or worthiness but in the absolute faithfulness of the One who blessed them — a faithfulness so complete that no outside power, human or supernatural, can overturn it.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Nature of Balaam

A significant interpretive question surrounds Balaam himself: Is he a genuine prophet co-opted for this moment, a pagan diviner constrained against his will, or something more sinister? Numbers 22 establishes that his motives are mercenary, and Numbers 31:16 and 2 Peter 2:15–16 later characterize him as a false teacher who taught Israel to sin. Revelation 2:14 identifies the “teaching of Balaam” as among the most dangerous corruptions of the church. The tension is real: How can genuine oracles of God come through so compromised a figure?

The Reformed reading acknowledges the tension without resolving it by softening either pole. Balaam is not rehabilitated by these oracles — his character and later actions confirm his corruption. But God is not constrained by the quality of His instruments. The oracles are God’s word placed directly in Balaam’s mouth (v. 5, v. 16) — not Balaam’s word sanctified by divine approval. This distinction matters homiletically: the power of the blessing lies entirely in God, not in the moral standing of the messenger. A Wesleyan reading might be tempted to see Balaam as a quasi-convert or as evidence that genuine spirituality can coexist with moral compromise; the text resists this. A dispensational reading sometimes overemphasizes the prophetic-predictive elements of the oracle (vv. 9–10 as Israel’s national separateness in a future age) at the expense of the primary claim about God’s unchanging word, which is the passage’s driving force.

“God Is Not a Man” (v. 19)

Verse 19 is perhaps the most theologically loaded verse in the chapter and invites several misreadings. Some Arminian and open-theist readings argue that divine repentance (God “changing His mind”) is a genuine feature of God’s experience — that God responds contingently to human action and that verses like this describe only one mode of divine action among others. The text, however, does not say “God sometimes does not lie” or “God is not a man in this particular case.” The statement is absolute and categorical: *God is not man, that He should lie, or a son of man, that He should change His mind*. The contrast is not between two types of divine activity but between the nature of God and the nature of humanity. This is not a statement about God’s emotional responsiveness (which the OT affirms elsewhere) but about His covenantal reliability. He has spoken blessing; it will stand. The Reformed reading honors the distinction between God’s *immutability of purpose* (what He has decreed will not be reversed) and other biblical texts about divine relenting (which operate at the level of historical providence, not covenantal oath).

The “Dwelling Alone” of v. 9

“A people dwelling alone, and not counting itself among the nations” (v. 9) has generated significant debate. Dispensational interpreters often read this as a permanent ethnic-

national separateness for Israel, providing canonical support for a distinct track for the nation in eschatology. The Reformed reading does not deny Israel's historical distinctiveness but grounds the "dwelling alone" in Israel's covenantal identity — set apart by God's choice and blessing, not by ethnic isolation as an end in itself. The New Testament develops this theme through the church as the "holy nation, a people for his own possession" (1 Peter 2:9), indicating that the covenantal logic of separation is fulfilled in Christ rather than suspended for a future dispensational restoration. The dispensational reading, while containing a legitimate observation about Israel's historical particularity, imports a structural grid onto the text that the passage itself does not establish. The primary homiletical claim — God's people are defined by His blessing, not by their own strength or standing — is not diminished by the Reformed reading; it is clarified.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 12:1–3** — God's original blessing of Abram establishes the covenant reality Balaam cannot overturn: "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse." Balak is attempting exactly what God declared impossible from the beginning.
 - **Genesis 22:16–18** — God swears by Himself because there is no higher oath, making the Abrahamic promise irrevocable. This is the theological ground beneath Numbers 23:19 — God's word stands because His nature stands.
 - **Deuteronomy 7:6–9** — God's choice of Israel explicitly grounded not in Israel's size or worthiness but in God's love and His oath — the same logic Balaam's oracles display from outside the camp.
 - **Romans 8:31–39** — Paul's climactic "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?" is the New Testament extension of the same claim: no power — human, angelic, present, or future — can overturn what God has spoken over His people. Balak's frustrated repositioning of Balaam is the ancient type; Paul's question is the answer that has always been true.
 - **2 Timothy 2:13** — "If we are faithless, He remains faithful — for He cannot deny Himself." The immutability of God's word in Numbers 23:19 finds its New Testament doctrinal crystallization here: God's faithfulness is grounded in His nature, not in our performance.
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Aim: To drive hearers from a posture of anxious self-assessment into settled assurance grounded in the character of the God who cannot lie — so that they stand where Balaam's oracle places them: blessed, uncursable, and defined by what God has said rather than what enemies have spoken.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Balak constructs seven altars; Balaam instructs the offering of seven bulls and seven rams	The ritual scale signals Balak’s serious investment in securing a curse — maximum effort, maximum preparation
3–4	Balaam withdraws to a bare height; the LORD meets him and puts a word in his mouth	The LORD’s initiative is immediate and unambiguous — He controls what Balaam will say
5–6	God places the oracle in Balaam’s mouth; Balaam returns to Balak and the Moabite princes	The word is God’s, placed in a man’s mouth — not Balaam’s wisdom or prayer answered
7–10	First Oracle: From Aram, Balak has brought me to curse Israel — but how can I curse whom God has not cursed? A people dwelling alone, uncountable, blessed	Four key affirmations: (1) the summons was Balak’s, (2) the curse is impossible, (3) Israel is set apart, (4) Israel is innumerable
10b	“Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his!”	Even Balaam’s personal response confirms the oracle’s force — he covets what Israel possesses
11–12	Balak protests: “I brought you to curse, and you have blessed them!” Balaam: “Must I not speak what the LORD puts in my mouth?”	Balak’s complaint names exactly what has happened; Balaam’s answer attributes the word entirely to God
13–14	Balak repositions Balaam: new vantage point, Pisgah’s summit, partial view of the camp	Balak’s logic: perhaps a different angle will yield a different result. The repositioning motif recurs — and fails
15–17	Second altar-building and sacrifice; the LORD meets Balaam again with a word	Identical structural pattern to the first oracle — God is not persuaded by repetition or geography

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
18–20	Second Oracle begins: “Rise, Balak, and hear! God is not a man, that He should lie, or a son of man, that He should change His mind. Has He said, and will He not do it?”	The theological center of the chapter — God’s word stands because God’s nature stands
21–22	The LORD’s God has not observed iniquity in Jacob; the shout of a king is among them; God brought them out of Egypt with the strength of a wild ox	Verse 21 is the most theologically complex: “observed iniquity” likely refers to judicial punishment, not moral impeccability — Israel is not accused before God in this moment
23–24	There is no enchantment against Jacob; what God has done will be declared; Israel rises like a lion	The oracle closes with the total futility of divination against God’s people
25–26	Balak: “Neither curse nor bless them.” Balaam: “Did I not tell you — I must speak what the LORD says?”	Balak’s second attempt at damage control fails; Balaam’s consistency underscores the point
27–30	Balak tries a third location — perhaps God will allow a curse from Peor	The futility escalates; the repositioning motif completes its pattern of failure

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–12	The First Oracle: God Has Blessed — Who Can Reverse It?
2	13–26	The Second Oracle: God Is Not a Man — His Word Will Stand
3	27–30	The Third Repositioning: Futility Confirmed, the Pattern Complete

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD's blessing over His people stands because God Himself cannot lie or change.

Primary Claim: God is compelling His people to rest their security not in their own condition or worthiness but in the absolute faithfulness of the One who blessed them — a faithfulness so complete that no outside power, human or supernatural, can overturn it.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] Reframe the source of your security. The consistent temptation of the believer is to ground assurance in an internal audit — How is my spiritual life? Do I feel close to God? Am I sinning less? Balaam's oracle demolishes this structure entirely. Israel's uncursability does not rest on Israel's spiritual condition — it rests on the word of One who cannot lie. The question God is pressing through this text is not "Are you good enough?" but "Do you believe Me?" The believer who learns to locate his security in the character of the God who promised rather than the quality of his own performance has made one of the most fundamental shifts available to him.

2. [Affections/Worship] Grieve the hours spent fearing what Balak fears. Balak believes that the right incantation, the right location, the right hired expert, can overturn what God has spoken. Many believers live functionally inside Balak's worldview — convinced that some word spoken over them, some failure in their past, some enemy's assessment, some accumulation of shame, has the power to undo God's declaration. This is not merely a theological error; it is a grief-worthy one. The passage is not a gentle correction — it is a declaration designed to make Balak's frantic repositioning look exactly as futile as it is. Sit with the futility of every voice that has told you that you are beyond blessing. God is not a man. It cannot stand.

3. [Will/Behavior] Stop repositioning yourself trying to earn a better vantage point. Balak's three repositionings are not random geography — they are the portrait of a man convinced that the right conditions will produce the result he is after. Believers do this spiritually: If I get my life together first, then I can come to God. If I fix this sin, then I'll be worthy of the blessing. If I perform better this week, then I can approach with confidence. The text refuses this logic. The word was already spoken; the blessing was already declared; the repositioning adds nothing and cannot subtract anything. Come as you are to the God whose word has already been placed.

4. [Mind/Belief] Learn to distinguish God's immutability from human stubbornness. "God is not a man, that He should change His mind" (v. 19) is sometimes misread as evidence that God is inflexible or unable to respond to prayer. The passage clarifies: the

immutability in view is the immutability of *sworn covenant promise* — God has spoken blessing; it will stand because He cannot contradict His own nature. This is not divine stubbornness; it is divine faithfulness. The same nature that makes God incapable of lying about His promise makes Him incapable of abandoning His people. Correctly understood, v. 19 is not a cold philosophical statement — it is the warmest possible news: the One who holds you has no capacity for betrayal.

5. [Affections/Worship] Let the irony of Balaam’s closing confession (v. 10b) land. Even the hired enemy looks at Israel under God’s blessing and says, “Let me die the death of the upright.” The pagan diviner, brought to curse, ends up expressing longing for what Israel possesses. This is not incidental. God is displaying through an outsider’s testimony what His people are meant to know from the inside: that to be under His covenant blessing is the most enviable state a human being can occupy. Live as someone who knows this. Let your assurance of God’s blessing over you be as visible to the watching world as Israel’s blessing was to Balaam — not because you are performing well but because the God over you cannot lie.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Numbers 23 is one of Scripture’s most direct declarations of divine immutability as it bears on covenantal promise. The chapter teaches that God’s word does not operate by the logic of human speech — subject to revision, political pressure, change of circumstance, or the persuasive power of the opposing party. “God is not a man, that He should lie” (v. 19) is not merely an attribute statement — it is a covenantal declaration: what God has spoken over His people, He will make good, because to do otherwise would require Him to contradict His own nature. The passage also teaches the utter sufficiency of God’s declared word over His people as protection against every opposing force — not because His people are strong or righteous but because the One who blessed them is not subject to reversal. This is the theological ground of all covenant assurance.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Numbers 23 is a canonical anchor for the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints — but it grounds that doctrine not in the resilience of faith but in the faithfulness of God. Reformed theology has always insisted that the believer’s security rests ultimately in divine election and God’s irrevocable word, not in the consistency of the believer’s performance. This passage shows that conviction is not a New Testament novelty: it is displayed from the heights of Moab through the mouth of a hired enemy. God’s people are uncursable not because they are holy enough to withstand attack but because the decree of the holy God who claimed them cannot be overturned. Furthermore, the passage demonstrates that God’s covenant purposes

cannot be derailed by external opposition — a truth that runs from Genesis 12 through Romans 8 to Revelation 22. Balak is the type of every power — spiritual, political, cultural — that has ever arrayed itself against the advance of God’s covenant people. The oracle’s answer is always the same: the LORD has blessed, and He has not reversed it.

Main Takeaway

The God who blessed you is not a man. He cannot be pressured, repositioned, or paid to change His mind. No voice — internal or external, past or present — that pronounces doom over you has the power to overturn what He has spoken. You are not uncursable because you are impressive; you are uncursable because the One who claimed you is incapable of lying. Stand there.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating Balaam as the hero of the narrative.** Balaam’s later career (Numbers 25, 31:16; 2 Peter 2:15; Revelation 2:14) makes him one of Scripture’s cautionary figures. The temptation to rehabilitate him — “Look, even Balaam got it right in this moment!” — misreads the text. The oracles are God’s word placed in Balaam’s mouth despite Balaam, not because of Balaam’s virtue. The hero of Numbers 23 is exclusively the LORD. Treating Balaam as an example of spiritual sensitivity or belated repentance imports a character arc the text does not support and obscures the passage’s central claim.
- **Reducing v. 19 to a cold philosophical abstraction.** “God is not a man, that He should lie” is not the conclusion of a metaphysics lecture — it is spoken over a specific people who are being actively targeted for destruction. Preaching this verse as mere doctrine (“God possesses the attribute of immutability”) strips it of its pastoral and covenantal force. The statement is designed to be felt as assurance by people under threat. Preach it that way.
- **Missing the significance of Balak’s repeated repositioning.** The three repositionings (22:41, 23:14, 23:28) are not narrative padding — they constitute the chapter’s structural argument. Each move represents the assumption that conditions can be arranged to achieve a different divine result. The cumulative failure of each attempt is the text’s enacted refutation of any theology that imagines human manipulation can alter God’s covenantal word. A sermon that skips this structural movement loses one of the passage’s most powerful illustrations.
- **Applying v. 21 (“He has not observed iniquity in Jacob”) as a statement of Israel’s moral innocence.** This verse does not teach that Israel was sinless — the wilderness narrative itself is saturated with Israel’s rebellion. The most defensible

reading is forensic: God has not laid iniquity to Israel's charge in this moment; His posture toward them is blessing, not judicial condemnation. A moralistic application ("God only blesses the obedient") inverts the passage's claim entirely. The point is precisely that the blessing stands despite what could be observed — because God's covenant word is not contingent on Israel's performance.

- **Failing to connect the passage to the New Testament fulfillment.** Numbers 23 can be preached as a piece of interesting Old Testament history without ever landing on the ground of Romans 8:31–39, where the same question ("Who can bring a charge? Who can condemn? Who can separate?") receives the same answer ("Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus"). Paul's climax in Romans 8 is the same claim Balaam's oracle makes — now grounded not only in God's covenantal word but in the blood of the One through whom the covenant is sealed. Preaching Numbers 23 to its full depth requires arriving there.
- **Generating behavioral applications that are not tethered to the passage's claim.** "Trust God more" and "Don't fear your enemies" are not wrong — but they are abstraction-ladder applications that could appear in any sermon. The specific application of this passage is much more targeted: stop locating your security in your own spiritual audit; stop treating opposing voices as having the power to reverse what God has spoken; learn to live in the assurance that the God who cannot lie has already spoken His word over you. Applications must be shaped by what this passage specifically claims, not by its general vicinity.