

INTERNATIONAL S. S. LESSON.

December 4th

(From National Sunday-School Teacher.)

LESSON X.

BALAAM. Num. xxiv. 1c-19.

GOLDEN TEXT.—"A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways."—Jas. i. 8.

PRELUSORY.—Our lesson forms the close of a very singular bit of history. A prophet of God was called upon to curse the people of God! Because of the "wages of unrighteousness" that were held out to him, this prophet actually desired to pronounce a curse upon the nation that God had chosen, but was compelled to utter a blessing instead. The history is a striking revelation of the fact that a man could be a prophet of God, and yet not be above the grosser temptations of this world. The fact seems to us a very strange one, and yet the record does not speak of it as though it were. As it always does, it tells the truth, and leaves the reader to form his own conclusions. Balaam among the prophets, and Judas among the apostles are enigmas that are hard to solve. Each one seems to have been a "son of perdition," and yet they were admitted to peculiar and special privileges such as, at the time of their possession, would seem to have endorsed them as saints. We do not pretend to have a theory concerning this that is perfectly satisfactory. Perhaps it is not well to attempt any. The lesson in regard to it, however, is exceedingly plain. "Wherefore, let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." And the higher the elevation the more terrible is the fall.

And now, perhaps, it will be best to anticipate a little, and to look at the steps of Balaam's fall. When the first messengers came, it would appear that he had no particular self-struggle in sending them back. They came "with the reward of divination in their hand," but without any parleying, such as would show a desire to go, he dismissed them, saying, "The Lord refuseth to give me leave to go with you." God's refusal had been very clear, and very peremptory: "Thou shalt not go with them: thou shalt not curse the people; for they are blessed." Balaam's answer to the first approach was as it should have been. But Balak not thus was to be put off. He sent other and "more honourable" ambassadors, offering larger and more seductive inducements. By this time that man of God had had more time to think about it. He weakened under the power of these bribes. Instead of sending them back, as he should have done, on the strength of what God before had said to him, he made manifest his strong wish to go by asking Balak's emissaries to tarry over for a night, that he might know what the Lord would say unto him more. This virtually was an appeal to the Lord to reverse his decision, and let him go. And it was in answer to this petition that God gave him permission to go, but showed his displeasure at his taking eager advantage of this suzerainty by sending an angel to meet him upon the way, with a drawn sword in his hand. It is plain that Balaam's reply to the second approach was *not* what it should have been. He should not have dallied with temptation.

It is not difficult to see what led the prophet to go with the messengers of Balak. Even if it were, the apostle Peter has made it plain. As the New Version (2 Peter ii. 15) has it: "Balaam loved the hire of wrong-doing." He did not love the wrong-doing itself, but the hire that was offered him. He gladly would have received the wages without the work had that been possible. He did not set out with the intention of disobeying the Lord—but with the hope of getting hold of Balak's silver and gold. The rewards that had been held out to him had brought him into a state of double-

mindedness that is pitiful to look upon. He desired to serve the Lord—and yet win the wages offered by the devil! He did not dare to curse, and yet it hurt him to bless. He returned to his house as much disappointed as was Balak himself.

The sequel shows how dangerous it is to be irresolute with regard to temptations. If a man kicks them out he is done with them—if he gives them a respectful audience, he is likely to be taken captive by them. Balaam listened, and, therefore, he went. He did not mean to curse the people whom the Lord had chosen to bless, but before he returned to his home, on account of his disappointment in not receiving the "hire of wrong doing" upon which he had set his heart, he had come into the spirit of cursing. He had become an enemy of God's people. He did what he could to bring about their ruin. He craftily advised Balak to destroy their purity through the licentious rites of Baal. He in this way was the cause of much suffering to Israel, though he did not accomplish all that he contemplated. At the last he miserably perished at the hands of the people he had been hired to injure. And thus by contrast he furnished a most striking comment upon his own devoutly expressed wish: "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!"

AN ANGRY KING (10, 11).—I. *His Wrath.* Called thee to curse—thou hast—blessed.

Of course Balak was angry. He had been at a good deal of pains and expense to secure the presence of this man, who, he supposed, had in his control the destinies of nations. Twice he had sent ambassadors for him. After his coming he had built for him twenty-one altars, and made offerings upon each one of them. He had good reason for his anger. He had sent for Balaam for a particular purpose. He had called him to curse the Israelites. If the prophet could not do this, he should not have come, but so have said. His coming was an implied promise that he would do according to the king's wish. And now he had done just the opposite of that for which he had been brought for so great a distance! According to the king's view he had strengthened his enemies, instead of withering them. Virtually the prophet had violated his agreement. As we have said, the king was justified, so far as the prophet was concerned, in being wrathful.

II. *His retaliation.* The Lord hath kept thee back from hono-.

No curse—no reward. Balak had not promised to fee the prophet for blessings. There is more in this, however, than a reminder of the business basis upon which they stood. Balak meant to tantalize the prophet with the magnitude of the reward which he had lost. And there seems to be, also, a relish in ascribing the loss to Jehovah, whose directions the prophet was following, and whose servant he professed to be. The king appeared to have aimed to produce in the mind of Balaam a dissatisfaction with his Divine Master. He did as a good many wicked persons now do, who delight to show to good men how they have misused it in a worldly way by not yielding to their evil solicitations, or following their knavish advice. He was one of that vast number who try to make it out that it does not pay to serve the Lord with strict fidelity. And the result of that teaching is that we have a great many people who are as double-minded as was Balaam. They are reaching with their right hand after the things of this world, while with their left they are trying to keep enough hold of the Lord so that they may not be lost. They are attempting to do that which is impossible. "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. Ye can not serve God and mammon."

But Balak was wrong, and all are wrong who uphold the like doctrine. The Lord keeps no man back from any real honour. He always honours those who honour Him. It is from dishonour that He tries to keep them back. He would have saved Balaam from the shame that now perpetually is his. He opened to him a career that would have made him illustrious for all time. Upon this he turned his back, and now there are none to do him reverence. Balak's house full of silver and gold was as nothing in value to that he had lost. His end and the estimate in which he now is held, shows whether it pays best to serve the Lord, or to serve the devil. The devil's bribes can not compare with the Lord's rewards. And he makes a very poor bargain indeed, who sells his own soul—although he may get the whole world for it.

A TRUTH-ADHERING PROPHET (12, 13).—Said I not unto thee, etc.

Balaam adhered to the letter of the truth, though he violated its spirit. He could take refuge behind this "Said I not," though his acts had said the contrary. In this history his lips and his deeds had been at variance. He indeed had told the messengers that he could not go beyond the word of the Lord—but he had not informed them that God had said to him: "Thou shalt not curse this people; for they are blessed." He had come along with them allowing them to understand that he was fettered only by what the Lord in the future might reveal unto him. He thus gave them an encouragement that he had no right to give. Morally, it was not just for him to retreat behind this "said I not." And, too, relative to the truth that had been revealed to him, he faithfully had adhered to that—because he did not dare do otherwise. The vision of that angel with the drawn sword was just enough to compel him to speak just the word that God put into his mouth. His adhesion to the truth had no virtue in it.

If "can not" had been "will not," the answer of Balaam to the messengers would have been a noble one, and would have been worth referring to for justification, supposing that there had been no concealment besides; for "can not" indicates helplessness—"will not" personal ability. "Can not" shifts the responsibility upon the Lord—"will not" takes that burden upon itself. "Can not" is the expression of one who is bound—"will not" is the utterance of one who feels that he has a liberty of choice, and who speaks according to his preference. "Can not" is the confession of a slave—"will not" is the declaration of a free man. "Can not" is an apology—"will not" is a defiance. You can trust the men who will say *will not* to stand by their colours—you never are sure of those who merely say they *can not*. When the sense of restraint is taken away, there is no telling to what excesses in evil the latter may go. Balaam is an instance of this. Then their real choice is made apparent. True loyalty is better than an oath of allegiance.

But Balaam's answer, false-hearted though it was, suggests: 1. That he is safe who adheres to the commandments of God. It is better to walk according to the letter of the law, than to throw it aside altogether. Balaam observing it after an external fashion was better than Balaam actively at war with God's people. Those who keep the letter of the law are in a fair way to catch its spirit,—always excepting, of course, those who have become thereby, incurably self-righteous. 2. That one should be fortified against all bribes and temptations by a "thus saith the Lord." It was with this that our Saviour Himself met the temptations of the devil. Those assuredly will decide right who look into the Scriptures for direction in all matters in regard to which they are in any doubt. 3. That they who speak God's message

should do so with fidelity, without regard to fear or favour. A prophet must be told the truth as well as a common man.

AN UNASKED PROPHECY (14-19).—I. *The Prophet's Inspiration.* Heard the words of God, &c.

The circumstances indicate that this revelation came without invitation either from Balak or Balaam. Hitherto Balaam had sought the Lord to ascertain His will—now the Lord sought him that He might make His will known. The Lord, as it were, seized upon him—Balaam falling into a trance. In this state He made known to him things of far more exceeding import than anything which before He had revealed unto him. On previous occasions He had shown to him the destinies of the people whom he had been called upon to curse—now He makes known to him the career of one infinitely above the people. The Lord directed the gaze of the prophet upward away from the motley multitude before him until he sees one who shines resplendent as a Star, and who holds in His hand the Sceptre of universal authority. Before he had looked only upon Israel—now he was permitted to behold the face of Christ.

II. *The Prophet's Prediction.* I. *Concerning Christ.* I see Him though He is not now, &c.

This was one of the dazzling visions of the Saviour that was given to the prophets. Some such visions had Daniel, who beheld "One like the Son of man" come down from the clouds of heaven, and approach to the Ancient of days. To some of the prophets was granted a sight of the Saviour in His glory, and to others a view of Him in His humiliation. Isaiah appears most clearly to have seen Him, both when He was rejected of men, and in His subsequent exaltation. In the prophecy before us, it is plain that Balaam saw beyond the cross, and beheld not the thorn-crowned Saviour, but the Star-crowned King!

The Star that Balaam saw was "the bright and morning star" of Revelation. Its coming was the token of the dawning of the day of righteousness. Isaiah beheld its approaching illumination, and exclaimed: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined." Israel began to look for the advent of this Star as the herald of their salvation. The magi were the first to note its shining, and came to Jerusalem with the eager enquiry, "Where is he that is born king of the Jews?" They had seen the Star, and now they were looking for the Scepter? For eighteen centuries that Star has been shining, its light increasing all the while. And now we are wondering when the dawn it has brought shall become the perfect day, when the darkness of earth shall disappear, and the Sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings!

2. *Concerning Christ's Kingdom.* Shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth.

It would seem as if the prophet saw the type and the antitype—David and Christ—on the same line of vision. He spoke of both, therefore, as if they were one. That would account for the mingling of events that were near and that were far, and for the assignment to one of achievements that were accomplished by both. The verbs "smite" and "destroy" do not appear properly to characterize the rule of Christ, but they do apply with emphasis to the reign of David. It is probable that the prophet saw more clearly the character of the conquest that was the nearest rather than that which was the most remote, and spoke accordingly. But the prophecy of subjugation is not exhausted upon the reign of David. He did not completely exterminate the enemies of Israel. He

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