Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)

Numbers 23:1-12

Brothers and sisters, peace be with you, this is Hwa-Chi. Thank the Lord, it's time to read the bible again. This week we will read Numbers chapter 23:1 through 24:13, which brings us to the end of the prophecies God spoke concerning Israel through the mouth of Balaam. Today, we will read Numbers 23:1–12.

Balaam was a gentile sorcerer who lived near the Euphrates River. Perhaps he learned about the LORD from the descendants of Terah, who was Abraham's father. Balaam was known for his ability to communicate with the spiritual realm, and his reputation reached the ears of Balak, king of Moab. King Balak offered Balaam great honor and rewards and invited him to come to the land of Moab. His purpose was to have Balaam curse the Israelites.

The Israelites had defeated Sihon, king of the Amorites, driven out the Amorites, and settled in the plains of Moab, directly across the Jordan River from the city of Jericho. In fact, the Israelites had no intention of becoming enemies of the Moabites. God had instructed the Israelites to go around the land of Moab and attack the Amorites instead. But King Balak did not know the LORD, did not understand the Israelites' intentions, and lacked the wisdom to handle international affairs. As a result, he came up with such a malicious scheme, hoping to use religious means to curse the Israelites.

The LORD searches and knows the human heart. While Balaam was on his way to Moab, God sent an angel to warn him that he could speak only the words God told him to speak. When Balaam arrived in Moab, King Balak personally came out to welcome him and took him to Kirjath Huzoth, a large city near the Arnon River. First, Balak warmly entertained Balaam. The next day, he took Balaam to the high places outside the city, to a hilltop shrine where Baal was worshiped. From there, they could see the outskirts of the Israelite camp. The Moabites were descendants of Lot, who knew the LORD God. However, because Lot coveted the comforts and advantages of this life, he separated from Abraham and moved to the fertile plain

east of the Jordan River. Later, his descendants followed the local inhabitants and began to worship Baal.

The word Baal means “lord”. The Canaanites worshiped Baal because they believed he controlled the sun, rainfall, and fertility. In an agricultural society, these things determined the harvest and the reproduction of livestock, making Baal one of the most important deities. Baal was widely revered among the Canaanites and gradually became the patron deity of various localities. His name was then combined with the name of a town or place. For example, Numbers 25:5 mentions Baal of Peor, meaning the Baal associated with Peor. At the end of chapter 22, Balaam was taken to a hilltop shrine where Baal was worshiped. From there, he could see the outskirts of the Israelite camp.

Verses 1–2: “Then Balaam said to Balak, ‘Build seven altars for me here, and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams.’ And Balak did just as Balaam had spoken, and Balak and Balaam offered a bull and a ram on each altar.”

Balaam told Balak to build seven altars and prepare seven bulls and seven rams. Balaam claimed to be a prophet, but his understanding of the God of Israel was superficial. The number seven was indeed important to the Israelites and represented completeness. For example, God completed His work of creation in seven days; the seventh day was the Sabbath, and the seventh year was the sabbatical year. Seven represented a complete cycle. Balaam knew that seven was a number of completeness, so he instructed King Balak to build seven altars and bring seven bulls and seven rams.

He used numbers associated with completeness because he had been commissioned by King Balak to curse the Israelites. Although God had warned him not to curse the Israelites, Balaam still harbored a hope that he might somehow get his way. Perhaps if he offered the most complete sacrifice—seven altars, seven bulls, and seven rams—he might please the LORD. Perhaps the LORD would then allow him to curse the Israelites, enabling him to receive the reward King Balak had promised him.

However, Balak did not understand the regulations God had established for Israel. There was to be only one altar. Sacrifices could be offered repeatedly on this one altar, which foreshadowed the cross of Christ. There was no need for seven crosses, nor could Christ be crucified repeatedly. In the Old Testament, there was only one altar, upon which sacrificial animals could be offered repeatedly. Although the sacrificial animals also foreshadowed Christ, Christ is eternal, whereas the sacrificial animals were not. Therefore, sacrifices had to be offered continually in the Old Testament until Christ came and offered Himself once for all. After that, no further animal sacrifices were necessary. Balaam's understanding of Israel's sacrificial system was therefore superficial.

Since Balaam had given these instructions, King Balak followed them. He built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each one. Balaam and King Balak participated together in these offerings. Among the Israelites, only the priests were qualified to offer sacrifices, and the sacrificial fire came from heaven. Neither King Balak nor Balaam was a priest. If they had offered their sacrifices on Israel's altar, both would have been consumed immediately by heavenly fire. But this was not the altar of the LORD. This improper and irregular form of sacrifice was merely a performance; God paid no attention to it. Balaam had only a superficial understanding of Israel's sacrificial system, but he knew enough to deceive King Balak, who did not understand the situation. They went through the elaborate motions of building altars and offering sacrifices, but God would not acknowledge what they were doing.

Dear brothers and sisters, when we offer sacrifices to God, we must follow His will and the procedures He has established. Among the Israelites, sacrifices were offered by priests, and the priests had to be male descendants of Aaron. Moses himself held the position of a ruler and was also a prophet. Yet Moses could not offer sacrifices himself; Aaron had to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people. Applying this principle, King Balak was the king of the Moabites and held the position of a ruler, while Balaam was a prophet. Neither a king nor a prophet was qualified to offer sacrifices. Balak was an earthly king representing earthly political power, while Balaam was a prophet pursuing personal gain. God's altar is holy. It must not be joined to the political powers of this world, nor should it be controlled

by earthly interests. King Balak and Balaam simply did not meet the requirements for offering sacrifices.

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ's teaching is even clearer. Mark 12:17 says, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." This clearly tells us that the church belongs to God and must not be controlled by earthly political powers.

Verse 3: "Then Balaam said to Balak, 'Stand by your burnt offering, and I will go; perhaps the LORD will come to meet me, and whatever He shows me I will tell you.' So he went to a desolate height."

Balaam had originally thought that after building seven altars and offering seven bulls and seven rams, he had demonstrated his sincerity and that the LORD God might speak to him during the sacrifices. However, the LORD paid absolutely no attention to his offerings. When Balaam received no response from God during the sacrifices, he guessed that his approach had probably failed. The elaborate ceremony had already been arranged, and he could not simply call it off. So Balaam improvised. He told King Balak to remain beside the burnt offering while he went off alone, hoping that he might encounter the LORD God. Perhaps he saw the doubtful expression on King Balak's face, so he added, "Whatever He shows me I will tell you." Balaam then went alone to a desolate height, a bare and barren hilltop. In fact, this was a common trick used by sorcerers: they would leave the crowd, go up a mountain alone, and then return pretending to deliver a message from God. Whether the words they reported truly came from God was something no one else could know; only the diviner himself claimed to know.

Verse 4: "Then God met Balaam, and he said to Him, 'I have prepared the seven altars, and I have offered on each altar a bull and a ram.'"

Balaam had not expected that God would actually appear to him. God's appearance had absolutely nothing to do with Balaam's sacrifices. God revealed Himself to Balaam because He had a message for Balaam to deliver to King Balak. God took

the initiative completely; this was an expression of His sovereignty. As soon as Balaam saw God, he immediately tried to claim credit, telling Him that he had prepared seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each altar. Perhaps he wanted to ask whether God was pleased with his sacrifices. But God completely ignored what Balaam said. God took the initiative to appear to Balaam because He intended to use Balaam's mouth to pronounce blessings upon Israel before King Balak.

Verses 5–6: "Then the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth, and said, 'Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak.' So he returned to him, and there he was, standing by his burnt offering, he and all the princes of Moab."

The LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth. This wording follows the original text closely and conveys the meaning more accurately than simply saying that the LORD spoke to Balaam. God placed His words in Balaam's mouth. He intended to use only Balaam's mouth to speak to King Balak, saying exactly what He wanted Balaam to say. Balaam returned to King Balak, who was standing beside the burnt offering with his officials. If their burnt offering had been effective, God would have spoken to them at the altar. But their sacrifice was merely part of Balaam's elaborate pretense. God's appearance to Balaam was entirely His own initiative, and He intended to use Balaam's mouth to pronounce blessings upon Israel. When Balaam returned to King Balak and his officials, his mouth spoke the words God wanted him to speak.

Verse 7: "And he took up his oracle and said: 'Balak the king of Moab has brought me from Aram, from the mountains of the east. Come, curse Jacob for me, and come, denounce Israel!'"

Balaam began to speak, and these were the words God had placed in his mouth. They were presented in poetic form, and Hebrew poetry emphasizes parallelism. The first line corresponds to the second, expressing the same idea. The third line corresponds to the fourth, and so on. "Balak the king of Moab has brought me from Aram, from the mountains of the east." Balak was the king of Moab. The "me" in these lines refers to Balaam, while Aram refers to the region near the Euphrates,

where Balaam's homeland was located. It was in the mountainous region to the east. These two lines explain that King Balak had summoned Balaam from the region near the great River. "Come, curse Jacob for me, and come, denounce Israel!" Jacob is Israel. King Balak of Moab had summoned Balaam for the purpose of cursing Israel. To curse Jacob and to denounce Israel mean the same thing. Balaam's oracle follows this kind of poetic parallelism throughout.

Verse 8: "How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how shall I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced?"

Balaam was merely an instrument whom God was using. God had placed His words in Balaam's mouth. Therefore, if God had not cursed Israel, Balaam could not curse Israel; if the LORD had not denounced Israel, Balaam could not denounce Israel. Balaam could speak only the words the LORD God wanted him to speak.

Verse 9: "For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him; there! A people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations."

This is the central statement in Balaam's first oracle. From the top of the mountain and from the hills, Balaam looked down upon the Israelites and realized that this people was special: they were a people dwelling alone, not reckoning themselves among the nations. Israel had been set apart by God and did not belong among the nations in the ordinary sense. This was a very important revelation: the Israelites held an extraordinarily special position.

This special position originated in God's calling of Abraham. Genesis 12:3 says, "I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." God called Abraham out from among the peoples and promised to bless him to such an extent that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him. Later, Genesis 13:16 says, "And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered." God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the dust of the earth. Thus,

God called Abraham so that his descendants would become as numerous as the dust, with the purpose that all the families of the earth might be blessed through Abraham. Abraham later fathered Isaac, Isaac fathered Jacob, and Jacob fathered twelve sons, who became the twelve tribes of Israel.

In the time of Moses, Moses led the twelve tribes out of slavery in Egypt and into the wilderness. While they were at Mount Sinai, God foretold Israel's future. Exodus 19:5–6 says, "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." This foretold that Israel would be a people dwelling apart, belonging to God. They were to become a kingdom of priests, leading the nations in worshiping God. Of course, this prophecy has not yet been fulfilled in its entirety. It will be realized when Christ establishes His millennial kingdom on earth.

To fulfill this prophecy, God set the nation of Israel apart from all other peoples. Throughout the long course of human history, Israel has suffered tremendous afflictions. The nation has lost its sovereignty, its people have been scattered among the nations, and they have endured massacres. Yet at crucial moments, God has always extended His protective arm. This is because Israel is a people dwelling apart, not reckoned among the nations, and the nations are to be blessed through them.

Dear brothers and sisters, we must remember this clearly. The Israelites are God's chosen people, entrusted with His special purpose and plan. In God's plan of redemption, the Redeemer who saves the nations was to come from Israel. In God's plan to bring all things together in one, the responsibility of leading the nations in worshiping God will also belong to Israel. God has prepared a special course of history for the Israelites, one that differs from that of the other nations of the earth. Therefore, when Israel departs from God's will, God Himself disciplines them.

As Christians, we should treat the people of Israel with kindness. As Paul says in Romans 11:17–18, "And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you."

We have received the benefits of salvation through Israel, so we must not boast against the Israelites. Although they were broken off because of unbelief, one day they will be grafted in again through faith. That day seems to be drawing near. In Matthew 24:32, Christ says, "Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near." Israel has been reestablished as a nation, and the day of Christ's return is drawing near.

Verse 10: "Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number one-fourth of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his!"

God had promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that their descendants would be as numerous as the dust of the earth. Balaam therefore exclaimed in amazement, "Who can count the dust of Jacob?" The descendants of Jacob were as numerous as the dust of the earth. Balaam looked at the Israelites, who were camped around the tabernacle in four separate camps. Each camp flew its own banner. Who could count even one of these camps, which represented one-fourth of the entire population of Israel?

Finally, Balaam expressed his envy and longing. How he wished he could become one of the Israelites! Although they had sinned in the past, their sins and transgressions could be covered through the offering of sacrifices. Therefore, God regarded them as righteous. What a blessing it is to be justified by God! Balaam exclaimed with longing, "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his!" Every person must face God's judgment at the end of life. Hebrews 9:27 says, "And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment." Those whom God has justified can face death with confidence and peace. What a blessing that is!

Verses 11–12: "Then Balak said to Balaam, 'What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and look, you have blessed them bountifully!' So he

answered and said, 'Must I not take heed to speak what the LORD has put in my mouth?'"

God used Balaam's mouth to speak words of blessing over Israel. When King Balak heard them, the words were extremely unpleasant to him, and he felt deeply dissatisfied. He said to Balaam, "I brought you here to curse Israel. Why have you blessed them instead?" Balaam replied that God had placed these words in his mouth and that he could not help but speak them. Balaam had prepared himself to pronounce curses, but God turned his curses into blessings. God intended to use Balaam's mouth to humiliate King Balak. The kings of the earth may devise schemes against Israel, but God is Israel's protector. As Psalm 2:1 asks, "Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing?" And Psalm 2:4 says, "He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the LORD shall hold them in derision." The nations and peoples of the earth may devise all kinds of schemes, but their plans will come to nothing. The Lord who sits in heaven will laugh at them. How blessed it is to be protected by the LORD God!

Let us pray together: Dear Lord Jesus, we see how blessed the Israelites of the Old Testament were to be protected by the LORD. Israel truly is a people dwelling apart, and salvation has indeed come from Israel. We who have received Your grace and been saved have already received the benefits that came through Israel. We have become the people of God under the new covenant and have been justified by You. As Paul reminds us, we must not boast against the Israelites. Although they were broken off because of unbelief, one day they will be grafted in again through faith. Therefore, we must pray for the people of Israel. Lord, shorten the time of their testing and help the Israelites turn back to You soon and receive the salvation of Jesus Christ. Although the international situation today is turbulent and chaotic, we firmly believe that You are the God who governs the course of human history. At the time You have appointed, Christ will return, and all Israel that remains will be saved. We ask You to preserve the saints in the church, that they may live godly lives and wait for Your return. We pray in the holy name of our Lord Jesus Christ.