

Three Lost Souls Who Could See Afar Off, and John Mark's Restoration

Ministry · February 1, 2009

Balaam — I Shall See Him, But Not Now

Numbers 24:15–17 records the last prophecy of Balaam, the son of Beor — the man hired by Balak to curse the people of God. He was a man whose blessing and cursing were for sale to the highest bidder. His heart was fastened on silver and gold. He was as blind as a man can be to spiritual things, living among idol-worshippers, with every form of darkness around him. And yet God opened his eyes — not by his own will or merit, but by compulsion. He who heard the words of God, who knew the knowledge of the Most High, who saw the vision of the Almighty falling into a trance. The words were God's words, not his. He was one who would ordinarily speak only the enemy's words, but this time God put His own words in his mouth.

And what did he say with his opened eyes? I shall see him, but not now. I shall behold him, but not nigh. There shall come a star out of Jacob. He could see — at a distance, far off in the future — the one who was coming. But he said not now. He was a lost soul who knew he was going to meet God, but not now. He wanted to put it off. And the Scripture is clear about that: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation. Every person who hears the gospel and says, yes, but not now, is in the company of Balaam. He never got saved. He went back to his place, came back to where the Midianites were, and was slain with them when Israel's armies came in judgment. He ended where the lost end, despite having seen more than most.

And his second statement is even more telling: I shall behold him, but not nigh. He was going to see the Lord — from a long way off. Television means to see at a distance — tele, far, vision, to see. Balaam was going to have a kind of television: he was going to see the Lord from the far side of a great gulf, as a judge and not as a saviour. Near is for those who know Him. Afar is for those who rejected Him.

The Wicked Man of Psalm 10 — God's Judgments Far Above Out of His Sight

Psalm 10:4–5 describes the wicked man differently: through the pride of his countenance, he will not seek after God. God is not in all his thoughts — or more precisely, all his thoughts are there is no God. Not once, but constantly, filling his mind. And why does a man spend so much time asserting that something does not exist? Because it does. Things that are entirely made up — elves, ogres, fairies — no one stands around insisting there are none. But men devote careers and lifetimes and volumes of philosophy to asserting that there is no God. The very energy of the denial is evidence of the reality being denied.

Verse 5 gives his condition: thy judgments are far above out of his sight. He cannot see them. Not because they are not there — the psalmist who wrote the psalm could see them — but because the wicked man has no faith, and without faith, the things of God cannot be seen. Even if he bought a television, even if he tuned to every religious broadcast, God's judgments would still be far above out of his sight. It is not a matter of information but of faith, and faith is given by God. Without God's opening of the eyes, these things remain invisible.

I shall see him, but not now. I shall behold him, but not nigh. — Numbers 24:17

The Rich Man in Luke 16 — He Lifted Up His Eyes, Being in Torments

Luke 16:23 gives the third case. The rich man died, was buried, and in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. From hell, you can see heaven. There is a great gulf fixed, and no one can pass from one side to the other — but from hell you can see as far as where Abraham is, and where the comforted souls of the redeemed rest. And that sight provides not comfort but additional torment: to see that there was a way in, to see that the one who lay at his gate in poverty and sickness is now in the place of blessing, to know that the opportunity was offered and refused.

From heaven, as far as can be told from the Scripture, you cannot see into hell. It would produce grief and sorrow to see those suffering there, and there is no grief or sorrow in heaven. The vision goes one way. The lost can see what they have missed; the blessed cannot see what would trouble them. That is not a feature of heaven's cruelty but of heaven's joy. But for the lost, the seeing-at-a-distance is one dimension of their loss. Three lost souls: Balaam saying not now and not nigh; the wicked man who cannot see God's judgments at all; and the rich man who sees them from the wrong side of the gulf. The Bible gives us high-definition truth about all these things so that we need not join their company.

John Mark — Away from the Work, and Restored

Acts 13 introduces John Mark accompanying Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. He was a young man from a godly home — the prayer meeting for imprisoned Peter was held at his mother's house — and there was evidently something of the Lord in his life. But in verse 13, when Paul and his company came to Perga, John departed from them and returned to Jerusalem. He did not merely go home; he went not with them to the work, as Acts 15:38 clarifies.

The sharp contention this produced between Paul and Barnabas over whether to take Mark on the second journey led to their separation. Barnabas, Mark's cousin, took him to Cyprus. They are never read of together again in the Scripture. It is one of the sadder passages in the record of the early church that Paul and Barnabas, who had worked so powerfully together, should part over this question.

But Mark was not lost. First Peter 5:13 shows him with Peter: Marcus my son. Who better to help restore a man whose affections had slipped than Peter himself, who had failed so completely and been so fully restored? And 2 Timothy 4:11, at the very end of Paul's life and ministry, in the cold dungeon from which he wrote: take Mark and bring him with thee, for he is profitable to me for the ministry. He was restored to Paul. Not only to service, but to Paul. To the man and to his gospel, to the truth that Paul had been entrusted to set forth. And in that little company — Luke, Mark, Aristarchus, Onesiphorus, a handful — were those who held fast to Paul and to the Lord's truth at the very end, in the day of ruin. May the Lord give us grace to hold fast to Paul and to stay close to the Lord in such a day.