When Jesus and the New Testament writers wanted to illustrate a point or establish a truth they would often turn a story found within the pages of the Old Testament. Stories such as: the creation and fall of Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:4-3:24), or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:22-19:29), or the Bronze Serpent (Numbers 21:4-9), or many more stories. It’s only natural that they should have referenced these stories, “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). However, more times than not, those using the stories of old made no comment on the details of the story that was being cited. Rather, the speaker assumes that the listener has already mastered the details of the story, thus, making possible an immediate understanding of the application(s) being made.

That’s where this series of articles finds its place. My goal is to help you master the details of the Old Testament stories that are cited in the New Testament so that you can better understand the eternal truths that are drawn from them. In our last lesson, we considered the story of Noah and the Flood and Cain and Abel, now we will turn our attention to the story of Balaam and seek to better grasp the truths Jesus, Peter, Jude and Paul made from this intriguing story.

**OT Story: (Numbers 22:1-25:18; 31:16)**

Before we begin our study of Balaam, it might be helpful for us to get the lay of the land of the book of Numbers. Numbers opens with the Israelites at Mount Sinai after they have received the law. They are preparing to move out and take the land of Canaan which God had promised them (1:1-10:10). Along the way, the people complained for food so God sent the manna (11:1-15). Elders from among the people are appointed to aid Moses in leading the people (11:16-35). Miriam and Aaron oppose Moses and are punished (12:1-16). Then, from a place called Kadesh Barnea, twelve spies, each representing one tribe, were sent out to spy out the land. While their reports were promising, ten of the spies expressed fears concerning the Israelites ability to take the land, while two, Joshua and Caleb plead with the people to trust the Lord and take the land (13:1-33). Faithlessness won out that day and the people rebelled, thus incurring God’s judgment upon the first generation of Israelites who were delivered from Egyptian bondage (14:1-45; cf. vv. 3-34). That generation wandered in the wilderness for forty years until all of them died. That wandering period, along with the revelation of certain laws is described in chapters 15-19. When we come to chapter 20, the second generation’s of Israelites set off toward Moab as they prepare to take the Promised Land. Along the way, Miriam, Moses sister, died (20:1), Moses sins and is prohibited from entering the Promised Land (20:2-21) and Aaron dies and the high priesthood is transferred to Eleazer (20:22-29). These events culminate to signal a change is under way in the nation of Israel. The final section of Numbers deals with the second generations preparations to enter and possess the land of Canaan. As the nation moves, the Arabs are destroyed (21:1-3), the King of Sihon is defeated (21:21-30), along with the King of Og (21:31-35). Following these events, the story of Balaam takes shape in chapters 22-25; 31:1-16. Numbers concludes censuses of the people (chaps. 26-27), instructions from
the Lord concerning various topics, the distribution of the land east of the Jordan, and land use and inheritance regulations (chaps. 28-36). With that overview of Numbers in mind, let’s backtrack to chapters 22-25 and take a closer look at the story of Balaam.

**Balak Summons Balaam (22:1-21):**

“When the people of Israel set out and camped in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan at Jericho. And Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. And Moab was in great dread of the people, because they were many. Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel” (vv. 1-3). It is not difficult to understand why the Moabites would fear the approaching Israelites. What a sight it must have been to see an innumerable host of people camped nearby. A people what had recently utterly destroyed a number of kings and their armies. The Moabites should not have feared the Israelites since the two nations were cousins through Lot and Abraham. In fact, God had commanded in the Law that the people where not to “harass Moab or contend with them in battle, for I will not give you any of their land for a possessions because I have given Ar to the people of Lot for a possession” (Deuteronomy 2:9). Nevertheless, fearful that the “horde of people” before them who would “lick up all that [was] around [them], as the ox licks up the grass of the field. So Balak… king of Moab” (v. 4) did the only thing he knew to do, hire the most powerful seer in the land, Balaam (v. 5). Balak's plan was for Balaam to curse the Israelites and then defeat them in battle. Balaam had an international reputation for successfully blessing and cursing people (v. 6).

Shortly thereafter, Balak sent a delegation of midlevel elders and princes, along with a large gift, “fees of divination,” to procure Balaam’s services (v. 7). Upon their arrival, Balaam instructed them to, “Lodge here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, as the L ORD speaks to me” (v. 8). Balaam made no immediate commitment one way or the other. He asked the delegation to stay the night, thus giving him the opportunity to inquire of the L ORD concerning the offer. As a part of his expertise, Balaam would need to be on the up-and-up concerning the deities worshipped throughout the known world. Throughout this story, Balaam will refer to God by His proper name, Yahweh (translated as L ORD) and the common name for deity, elohim (translated God). However, God will only use His common name with Balaam, thus indicating that He did not have a covenant relationship with Balaam. In other words, they were not on first name basis. Balaam full expected the God of Israel to speak to him and He “came to Balaam” (perhaps through a dream; cf. Genesis 20:3; 31:24) that night asking, “Who are these men with you?” (v. 9). Balaam offered the details of Balak’s message (v. 10-11). In essence Balaam asked, “Yahweh, there’s a group of guys here from Moab who are willing to pay me handsomely to curse your people, would that be all right with You?” God answered back, “You shall not go with them. You shall not curse My people, for they are blessed” (v. 12; cf. Genesis 12:2-3). Balaam reports back to his guest, “The Lord has refused to let me go with you” (v. 13). On the surface, this seems to summarize what God had said. However, nothing could be farther from the truth. God forbade Balaam from going with the men and attempting to do what they were hiring him to do (cf. Deuteronomy 23:4b-5). Rather, he tells the delegation God refused to give him permission to go. As we will see, both answers are similar but quite different in their intensity.

Upon hearing about Balaam’s refusal to come, Balak sent more “princes, more in number and more honorable than these” (v. 15) with this message, “Let nothing hinder you from coming to me, for I will
It seems Balaam’s refusal to come was interpreted as, “The Lord says you’re not paying me enough.” Desperate, Balak responded with, “Name your price! Just come and help me!” At first blush, Balaam’s response to this new and much more lucrative offer seems commendable. “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the L ORD my God to do less or more” (v. 18). He seems to be saying that there is no way he can be persuaded to violate the commandment of Yahweh, his God. While Balaam claimed the L ORD as his God, he had an inadequate grasp of who God was. By his own admission, God’s first revelation should have settled the matter, he could not go no matter the price. But, as we will see, Balaam was greedy and in his heart desired to go with the delegation back to Balak. So, he implored God again (v. 19) and the Lord responded, “If the men have come to call you, rise, go with them; but only do what I tell you” (v. 20). Did God change His mind? How can we explain His refusal to let Balaam go the first time, but gave him permission the second time? First of all, God had not changed His mind about Israel not being cursed by Balaam, or anyone for that matter. Second of all, it seems that God is saying, “If they come back a third time, then go with them.” If this is the case, then Balaam’s disobedience would explain why “God’s anger was kindled because he went” (v. 22). Finally, we need to recognize that when man’s heart is so blinded by sin (greed), as was the case with Balaam, God gives them up to their wicked desires (cf. Romans 1:18-32). For me, these reasons (and others could be offered) help explain God allowing Balaam to go. This section ends with, “So Balaam rose in the morning and saddled his donkey and went with the princes to Moab” (v. 21).

**Balaam’s Donkey and the Angel (22:22-41):**

In this hilarious scene, the infamous seer, the one at the center of attention, was humiliated by a donkey. Even though God had given Balaam permission to go, He knew his motives were not right. Therefore, “God’s anger was kindled because [Balaam] went, and the angel of the Lord took His stand in the way of his adversary” (v. 22a). Not only had Balaam angered God, but through his actions had made himself and enemy to God. The Hebrew for “adversary” is literally, satan, in fact 19 out of its 27 occurrences in the Old Testament it is translated “satan”. Balaam’s was in a tough spot, but if not for God’s mercy and grace, he would have surely been a dead man. “And the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road. And the donkey turned aside out of the road and went into the field. And Balaam struck the donkey, to turn her into the road” (v. 23). Balaam, the seer who sees the divine (cf. 1 Samuel 9:9, 11, 19) is out done by a better prophet, a donkey. Again, “Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. And when the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she pushed against the wall and pressed Balaam’s foot against the wall. So he struck her again” (vv. 24-25). Finally, the angel of the Lord positioned himself in a narrow place “where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she lay down under Balaam. And Balaam’s anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff” (vv. 26-27). Three times the donkey saw the angel of the Lord poised to kill Balaam, three times she saved her master’s life and three times Balaam mercilessly beats his mount. What happens next seems absolutely incredible, and yet it did not make much of an impression on Balaam, the donkey spoke. “Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, ‘What have I done to you that you have struck me these three times?’” (v. 28). Without batting an eye, “Balaam said to the donkey, ‘Because you have made a fool of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you’” (v. 29). Balaam was so blinded by greed and enraged by the embarrassment it

www.claygentry.com
never occurred to him that he was talking to his donkey. Oh, how this must have appeared to the Moabite entourage. Here’s the most famous seer and prophet in the world who can overpower even the gods and he cannot even keep his donkey on the road. If that was not humiliating enough, he carried on a conversation with his donkey. His donkey tries to reason with him saying, “‘Am I not your donkey, on which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat you this way?’” To which Balaam replied “‘No.’” (v. 30). Balaam should have realized something was amiss.

It is at this point in the story that God opens Balaam’s eyes to what the donkey had seen all along, “And he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, with his drawn sword in His hand. And he bowed down and fell on his face” (v. 31). We do not know how much of this scene was witnessed by those around Balaam. They may have heard the donkey speak but it’s doubtful they saw the angel of the Lord since the text says only Balaam’s eyes were opened but they may have heard the angel’s voice (cf. Acts 9:7). “And the angel of the Lord said to him, ‘Why have you struck your donkey these three times?’” Not waiting for an answer the angel continued, “‘Behold, I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse before me. The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live’” (v. 32-33). Balaam wanted to kill his donkey, yet she was the only reason Balaam was not killed by the angel of the Lord. In kind, Balaam wanted to curse Israel so the Moabites could kill them off, yet through Israel would come the only means by which humanity could obtain life (cf. Genesis 22:16-18). Humbled, Balaam confesses, “I have sinned, for I did not know that you stood in the road against me. Now therefore, if it is evil in your sight, I will turn back” (v. 34). The Lord gives him permission with one stipulation, “speak only the word that I tell you.’ So Balaam went on with the princes of Balak” (v. 35).

As soon as Balak hears that Balaam is coming, he meets him “at the extremity of the boarder” (v. 36). Balak then reiterates his ability to pay and honor Balaam (v. 37). Balaam states up front, “Behold I have come to you! Have I now any power of my own to speak anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that must I speak” (v. 38; cf. vv. 18, 20, 35). If Balaam has learned anything it is this: one who speaks for God must do so precisely, repeating verbatim, what God has spoken. Balak could not say he had not been warned. Eager to get started, Balak immediately prepares sacrifices, and the next morning gets Balaam into position to curse the people (vv. 39-41).

**Balaam’s Four Oracles (23:1-12 - 24:25):**

While Balaam’s oracles, or blessings, are a large part of the Numbers account, they are not referenced per se by the New Testament writers. Therefore, let’s simply summarize them:

The first three oracles follow a similar pattern: First, Balak takes Balaam to various high points in order to get a good view of Israel (22:41; 23:13): Bamoth-baal (22:41), Pisgah (23:14), and Peor (23:28). Second, seven altars are built with seven bulls and rams sacrificed at each place (23:1-3, 14, 29-30). Third, while Balak stays by the altars, Balaam meets with the Lord some distance away (23:3-5; 15-16) but with the third oracle, the Spirit of God descended on him (24:1-2). Fourth, despite Balak’s instance, Balaam pronounces a long, three-part blessing on Israel: the first two address Israel’s wilderness wanderings (23:7-10, 18-24), but the third looks forward to Israel in the land of Canaan (24:3-9). Fifth,
Balak reacts angrily to each blessing (23:11, 25; 24:10-11). Sixth, Balaam reasserts that he can only speak as the Lord puts into his mouth (23:12, 25; 24:10-11; cf. 22: 18, 20, 35, 38). The fact that Balaam does not curse the people, thus forgoing an extraordinary amount of riches and honor, reinforces the point that Balaam is speaking what God puts into his mouth. Balak's words are coming back to haunt him, “for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed” (22:6b).

Following the third failed attempt to curse Israel, “Balak’s anger was kindled against Balaam, and he struck his hands together” (24:10a). As a side note, everyone’s anger has been kindled; God’s (22:22), Balaam’s (22:27) and now Balak’s. Because Balaam did not do what Balak wanted, he has to get out of Dodge quick (24:10b-11), but not before he gives one last word from the Lord. Unlike the first three oracles, the fourth is curse upon the Moabites, the Amalek’s, the Kenites, along with Asshur and Eber (24:15-24). “And then Balaam rose and went back to his place. And Balak also went his way” (24:25).

**Baal Worship at Peor and Balaam’s Death (25:1-18; 31:8, 16):**
With the departure of Balaam we might suppose that we have left Balaam behind. Indeed, Balaam is not even named in Numbers 25, but as we will see, later texts make it abundantly clear that Balaam and Balak are behind the events of Numbers 25.

“While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab” (v. 1). Poised on the east side of the Jordan, across from Jericho, the Israelites are ready to take the Promised Land (cf. Joshua 2:1). Unbeknownst to them, an unsuccessful spiritual attack had been waged against them by the Moabites and the Midianites through Balaam. Balaam had been offered a lucrative fee for his services but was not able to fulfill the contract. Can you imagine Balaam riding back toward Mesopotamia, going over and rehearsing the events of the past couple of days. He had experienced something of that was truly divine. He had been a prophet for the one true God and had even been filled with God’s spirit. Balaam knew what it was like to communion with God in a way few have ever known. He must have been on a spiritual high. Then it must have hit him like a ton of brick, he had lost out on the biggest payday of his life. If any vestiges of his holy experience were left, they vanished away and were replaced with greed. The wheels started to turn. If he could not curse Israel, he could get God to punish them and so Balaam devises a plan to use God against His own people. A plan that he would share with Balak, thus ensuring he got his money. In Moses’ own words, “On Balaam’s advise, [Moabite and Midianite women] caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the incident of Peor, and so a plague came among the congregation of the Lord” (Numbers 31:16).

Following Balaam’s counsel, Balak (cf. Micah 6:5) instructed the women of Moab and Midian to “invite the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods” (v. 2). The people were breaking the first two commandments; “You shall have no other gods before me.” And, “You shall not bow down to” idols (cf. Exodus 32:3-4). “So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel” (v. 3). Baal was the main Canaanite fertility god, whom Israel was constantly tempted to worship (cf. 1 Kings 16:31-33; 18:17-18; 19:18). A central component of fertility god worship was sexual intercourse as noted in v. 1, “whore with the daughters of Moab” (cf. Numbers 31:13-18). Drastic action was needed to stop the spread of Baal worship among the people; “Take all the chiefs of the
people and hang them in the sun before the Lord” (v. 4a). Though it is not mentioned here, “the fierce anger of the Lord” (v. 4b) has brought an indentified plague among the people (cf. v. 9) which will “turn[ed] away from Israel” (v. 4c) if the leaders are killed. Moses then commanded “the judges of Israel, ‘Each of you kill those of his men who have yoked themselves to Baal of Peor” (v. 5). To harmonize vv. 4 and 5 we would say “all the chiefs of the people” (v. 4) means the leaders who have lead the people in worship to Baal of Peor (v. 5). What follows in vv. 6-8a is the actions of one such judge, Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest.

As the plague spread through the camp of the Israelites, the “whole congregation of the people” gathered at the tent of meeting weeping for the sins of the people (v. 6b). Brazenly, “one of the people of Israel came and brought a Midianite woman to his family, in the sight of Moses and the whole congregation” (v. 6b). This man was named “Zimri the son of Salu, chief of a father’s house belonging to the Simeonites” (v. 14). He was the very kind of man God had commanded to be killed. “When Phinehas… saw it, he rose and left the congregation and took a spear in his hand and went after the man of Israel into the chamber and pierced both of them, the man of Israel and the woman through her belly” (vv. 7-8a). Filled with zeal for God's honor (cf. v. 11 NIV), Phinehas killed a leader of Israel while he and the Midianites woman were engaged in ritual sex. Because of his actions, “the plague on the people of Israel was stopped. Nevertheless, those who died by the plague were twenty-four thousand” (vv. 8b-9). As a result of his zeal for God, Phinehas received a special blessing from God, “Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, and it shall be to him and to his descendents after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood” (vv. 12-13a).

A short time later God spoke to Moses and said, “Harass the Midianites and strike them down, for they have harassed you with their wiles, with which they beguiled you in the matter of Peor…” (v. 16-18a). Israel exacting vengeance on the Midianites and a record of the spoil that was collected is mentioned in Numbers 31:1-20. Two points to highlight from that passage. One, during the battle, the Israelites killed Balaam with the sword (v. 8; cf. 22:22-41). One cannot help but think of the words of Jesus, “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his own soul?” (Mark 8:36). Second, the men wanted to bring back as spoil, the very women who “on Balaam’s advise [had] caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord” (v. 15-16). Moses’ solution was to put all the males to death, along with all women “who [had] known a man by lying with him” (v. 17). While this might seem heinous, these women were responsible for seducing the Israelites, thus they had to be killed.

**NT Application:**

Now that we have established the details of the story of Balaam, let’s turn our attention to New Testament applications from this story:

**Flee From Idolatry and All Its Trappings (1 Corinthians 10:8)**

In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, he addressed several issues plaguing the church; some were reported to him, others he addressed at the request of the church. One of the questions he dealt with regarded eating meats offered to idol (cf. 1 Corinthians 8:1). Over the course of three chapters (8-10), Paul systematically answers their questions.
In chapter 8, Paul takes the viewpoint of some of the Corinthians that since an idol is nothing; consequently there can be nothing wrong with eating meats offered to idols (cf. 1 Corinthians 8:4-6). However, Paul pointed out that “not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled” (1 Corinthians 8:7). Therefore, “if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged... to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ” (1 Corinthians 8:10-12). Using himself as an example, Paul demonstrates that as Christians they should be willing to lay aside one’s rights for the greater good of the kingdom (1 Corinthians 8:13-9:23). It is then that Paul gets down to the heart of the Corinthian’s motivation, self-indulgence and not self-control. “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one received the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep in under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). The Corinthians were caught up in a self-indulgent lifestyle and thus they insisted on attending the idolatrous festivities and ceremonies. They had gotten soft, and they were living pleasure-seeking lives, rather than the disciplined lives of an athlete. From there, Paul reviews the history of Israel, and especially the major failures of the nation. While the nation had enjoyed great blessings (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:1-4), “Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things took place as examples to us, that we might not desire evil as they did” (1 Corinthians 10:5-6). It is in the context of these examples that Paul mentions the story of Balaam, especially the sin at Peor:

“We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day” (1 Corinthians 10:8)

Paul is reminding the Corinthians that God punished the Israelites for the same type of self-indulgent sin that some of his readers were committing. “Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written for our instruction...” And what was that instruction, “Let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:11-12). The Corinthians who went to the idol temples thought they would not get burned, yet the story of Balaam says that whenever we give an inch, Satan will always take a mile. Therefore, we must flee idolatry (1 Corinthians 10:14) and all of its trappings. Paul does continue his argument by exposing eating meat offered to idols as joining one with demons (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:14-23). He then goes on to lay down some guiding principles for the Christian to follow when eating meat in a pagan world (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1). Ultimately, in all that we do we must imitate the Christ.

For the Love of Money, Many Will Depart From the Faith (2 Peter 2:15-16; Jude 11)
The twin epistles of 2 Peter and Jude were both written for the purpose of exposing, thwarting and defeating the influence of false teachers and their damning doctrines. As we said in our last point, the Christian life demands self-control. By contrast, the false teachers and their followers, Peter and Jude were confronting “follow[ed] their sensuality... And in their greed they exploit[ed Christians]” (2 Peter 2-3).
Additionally, they were “grumblers, malcontents, following their own sinful desires” (Jude 16a). In both epistles, Peter and Jude highlight the greed as a motivation of why these false teachers and their followers would depart from the truth and go after error. In both cases, these inspired men turned to the story of Balaam, saying:

“Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain for wrongdoing, but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet’s madness.” (2 Peter 2:15-16)

And,

“Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam’s error and perished in Korah’s rebellion.” (Jude 11)

Click here for a chart showing the similarities between 2 Peter and Jude.

Balaam had communed with God, as His prophet to Balak, but discarded it all for wealth and honor. These false teachers and those who followed them were going the way of Balaam by trading the eternal, spiritual blessings that came with communion with God for temporal, earthly gain. The apostle Paul warned that, “Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” (1 Timothy 6:9-10). Gold had replaced God for these apostates and their end would be like Balaam’s, pierced through with God’s judgment. The question for us is, has a desire to material riches replaced our desire to be with God? Jesus rhetorically asked, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?” (Matthew 16:26). It will profit you nothing in eternity to have all the riches of this life. But sadly, many sell their souls for a pittance. Don’t be that kind of person; don’t go the way of Balaam.

Expel Those Who Hold the Teaching of Balaam (Revelation 2:14-15)
The book of Revelation is probably the most misunderstood and misapplied book in the entire Canon. The book was a revealing of “things that must soon take place” (Revelation 1:1) and was addressed to “the seven churches of Asia” (Revelation 1:4). Thus, the book is a revealing of imminent events that would affect believers throughout Asia, or what is modern day Turkey, and the Roman Empire. Revelation can easily be outlined in three points, (1:1-20) Introduction and Purpose for Writing; (2:1-3:22) Seven Letters to the Seven Churches; and (4:1-22:21) Christ Defense of His Church and the Destruction of His Enemies. (You can find a more in-depth introduction here.) It is within the context of the seven short addresses, or letters, to seven of the churches of Asia that we have a reference to Balaam.

“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and
you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.” (Revelation 2:12-17)

As we saw in our previous two points, the lure of idol worship, i.e. the feasting and sex, plagued the early church. While some in the church in Pergamum were loyal and faithful to Christ during persecution, they had failed to confront those who held, what the Lord called, the doctrine of Balaam. Just as Balaam put a stumbling block before the Israelites these false teachers and their followers were putting a stumbling block before the believers. Both Balaam and the apostates in Pergamum were teaching believers to eat foods sacrificed to idols and to indulge in ritual sex with temple prostitutes and worshippers. This similar doctrine was also found in Thyatira (cf. Revelation 2:20-23). Jesus was calling for a two-fold repentance. First, the church was to repent for not confronting this false doctrine. Second, those who taught and/or practiced the doctrine of joining with idol worship were to repent of their sins as well. If they did not repent, then the Lord would come and war against them just has he did with Balaam with the same result, death. Pergamum is an excellent example of what can happen to so many Christians and congregations. We can stand firm in times of extreme trial, but let Satan in the back door through false teaching. Let us examine our lives to see what blind spots we might have in our lives and congregations, least the Lord come and war against us.

As you can see, the story of Balaam was a valuable illustration of several different New Testament teachings. It's my prayer that you will heed the warnings against greed and the love of money, and indulging in false teaching and idolatry. If I can help you in your spiritual journey, please email me at clay@claygentry.com.

---

1 Some commentators believe that since Paul had just quoted from Exodus 32 in v. 7, then v. 8 very likely refers judgment that came on the people as a result of worshipping the golden calf (Exodus 32:25-35). While, others say v. 8 refers the Balaam and the Baal worship at Peor. However, the number of dead 23,000 vs. 24,000 are not exact, thus these numbers are viewed as approximations.