

LIVING FREE – Week 10

Monday, August 9

In 1935, when Bill Wilson, a just-sober alcoholic, met Bob Smith, a man detoxing from alcohol, they came together to form a new fellowship for alcoholics. Their movement sprang from a small Christian community called the Oxford group, a fellowship that took its pattern from the community of the first Christians. These men, with a few others, worked out the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Have you ever noticed where the 12-steps begin? Here is the first step:

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

Yes, the steps don't begin with a can-do philosophy of success, but an honesty about defeat. You begin your journey toward sobriety with an honest assessment of your failure. You can't do it, and you also cannot manage your own life. This honesty about your condition opens the way for each of the next steps taken in the direction of freedom from addiction.

Here's our text for today:

Numbers 21:4-9

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. ⁵And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food." ⁶Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." ⁹So Moses made a bronze^[G] serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

Now, this event seems strange to us, that is, until we look more deeply at what happens. The whole scene begins with the people speaking against God. The Lord is the one who sustained and nurtured his people in the wilderness, but the people stand against him. They accuse him of mistreatment when they become impatient. They are outside the land. They can see the fulfillment of the promises of God, but they cannot enter in to take possession of it. They become discontent and turn on the Lord that saved them. Why would God put them in this place? He wants them to learn to trust him, to learn a healthy dependence on him. But they refuse to trust God and his timing. In their complaining, the Lord sends fiery serpents that bite the people. The venom of these snakes kills many of the people. This seems to be a sign of how the discontent of the people was destroying them. As the people are dying, they call out to the Lord to save them. God doesn't immediately stop the serpents. Instead, he instructs Moses to do something very curious. Moses is to fasten a bronze serpent on a staff and hold it high into the air for the people to look at. If they looked upon the serpent, they would live. Now, let's think about this for a moment. Why would God ask Moses to make a bronze snake for them to look at? Weren't the snakes killing the people? What was God showing the people? Yes, they had to look on the very thing that was killing them in order to survive. To do so was an admission of their sin, of the thing that was destroying their lives. Wow! Here was the first step thousands of years before Bill Wilson and Bob Smith recorded it. Here is what those men wrote about this step:

WHO cares to admit complete defeat? Practically no one, of course. Every natural instinct cries out against the idea of personal powerlessness. It is truly awful to admit that, glass in hand, we have warped our minds into such an obsession for destructive drinking that only an act of Providence can remove it from us.

Yes, to look on the serpent was the admission of their defeat. The first step of AA as with the serpent in the wilderness is the admission of failure, not the announcement of success. It is by looking at the thing killing us that the way can be opened for life. Now, this is a lesson that each of us needs to learn. We need to look at our lives with honest assessment, to be honest about the thing that is destroying us. Yes, it is in the admission of our defeat that we can come to trust God

and to look to him. Now, can you imagine Israel in the wilderness? All they had to do was look at the bronze serpent. Can you imagine that some people just would not do that? That they would refuse this simple act that could save them? I can't imagine that, but in a sense that is what we do when we refuse to admit the thing that is killing us. As the Lord Jesus was speaking with Nicodemus, he spoke of this moment in the wilderness:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. -John 3:14-15

Yes, Jesus is speaking about the way he will be lifted up on the cross. His cross is the statement that the very thing putting Jesus there, our sin, is killing us. It is by looking to Jesus on the cross that we will have life, eternal life. Yes, anyone that looks to him for life will be saved.

Let's pray:

Almighty God, we refuse to look upon the thing that is killing us. We refuse to admit defeat. We need to see Jesus that we might have life. Enable us to trust that your grace is enough to bring us life. For we pray in his name. Amen.

Tuesday, August 10

My family has had a home in the mountains of North Carolina for a number of generations. One of the challenges of having a home at a relatively high elevation is the scarcity of water. For more than twenty years, a neighbor allowed us to draw water from his well. But the time came when he told the family that other arrangements needed to be made. My father then had a well drilled on the east side of the property. He sunk the well over five hundred feet, but there was no water to be found. This was a very expensive proposition, drilling through solid rock. For a while, on the mountain, my dad had the nickname "Dry Hole Carson." We have learned that on the mountain you can live without power for a while if you must. You cannot live without water.

Now, here is a scene from the book of Numbers:

Numbers 21:16-18

And from there they continued to Beer; that is the well of which the LORD said to Moses, "Gather the people together, so that I may give them water." ¹⁷ Then Israel sang this song: "Spring up, O well!—Sing to it!—¹⁸ the well that the princes made, that the nobles of the people dug, with the scepter and with their staffs."

Now, this scene is surprising for a number of reasons. First, the Lord provided water for his people throughout their time in the wilderness, but never through a well like this. As the people were so often on the move, a well would not be a practical solution to their problem for long. Literally, they would pull up the stakes of their tent and be gone. For this reason, this moment should catch our attention. Why did the Lord provide them with water this way? Well, first, water in the wilderness is the most beautiful of the signs of life. Where there is water, life will spring up. The people had been in the wilderness nearly forty years, and this sign reminds them that life is coming. They have a future. They will one day settle where they can draw water from a well. You can hear their joy as they sing a song of celebration of this glorious gift of life. But also notice what the song reveals. God didn't dig the well for them. Yes, God gave them water, but they dug the well. We want the miraculous when we do not need to do any work, but God wants to engage us in the work that we might be able to enjoy the time of refreshment when he provides it to us. I remember being in central Haiti visiting an orphanage in the middle of nowhere. Each day a truck had to bring water for the children, for cooking and washing and drinking. But on the site, there was a well being dug. At the bottom of a deep shaft a man with tools was pushing deeper so that the little settlement would have a ready supply, so that they would not have to wait each day for a truck to bring them water. The children knew that water would soon be coming. This is what happened on the mountain at our family's mountain home.

My father refused to give up. He had another well drilled on the other side of the property almost five hundred feet deep and found a very slow trickle of water. A pump was lowered to the depths on a metal pipe, and that well provides water for the house. When we are there, I'd like to sing a song of thanksgiving to God over that well, rejoicing in the water the Lord has provided to us. Now, I have

learned that God has life giving water for all of us. He ordains times of refreshment in our dryness, times when we sing of his goodness. That doesn't mean that we do not have to dig the well. Yes, we put in the work of seeking the Lord, leaning into him and his goodness and love. But he is the provider of life, again and again. There was this ceremony the Jewish people conducted at the time of the feast of Tabernacles, the time when they remembered their years in the wilderness. It was a water ceremony remembering how the Lord provided them refreshment in the wilderness. One year, Jesus went up to Jerusalem to celebrate with the people.

Here is what we are told:

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'"³⁹ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive... -John 7:37-39

Yes, Jesus not only went to the feast, but as the water ceremony was taking place, he shouted out to everyone. Do you remember the water the Lord provided in the wilderness? I am the well of living water. I am the source of life. Yes, he is the prince whose scepter opens the well to life. He says: If you come to me and drink, you will also become a water source, from your heart streams of living water will flow. He promised he would provide to those that believe in him his Spirit. Life would flow from them as water flowed in the wilderness. Now, as you can imagine, this created quite a disturbance as people debated about who he was and what it all meant. Suffice it to say, this is what God intends to do in you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water, to reveal life in you by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Let's pray:

Our God and Father, you are good to your people, providing them water in the wilderness, the provision of life, day in and day out. Jesus is the living water, and we desire this day to drink deeply of him so that we might be refreshed and enabled to live in your grace. Then Lord by your Spirit make us channels of this water of life to those that are around us. For we pray in your name. Amen.

Wednesday, August 11

During Gary Hart's 1988 presidential campaign, the New York Post reported on its front page in big, black block letters: "GARY: I'M NO WOMANIZER." It was nothing more than a smear campaign. The strategy is pretty simple. First, you make something up. Then you dish it to the press, and then as soon as it is in print you say, "Everyone's talking about it." Once it blows up in the news, it's treated like the truth. Yes, this did help derail the campaign of Gary Hart. Now, the text we have before involves setting up a smear campaign attacking Israel.

Here's the story:

Numbers 22:1-6

Then the people of Israel set out and camped in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan at Jericho. ²And Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. ³And Moab was in great dread of the people, because they were many. Moab was overcome with fear of the people of Israel. ⁴And Moab said to the elders of Midian, "This horde will now lick up all that is around us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field." So Balak the son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, ⁵sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor at Pethor, which is near the River in the land of the people of Amaw, to call him, saying, "Behold, a people has come out of Egypt. They cover the face of the earth, and they are dwelling opposite me. ⁶Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed."

As Israel was approaching the land of promise, they were a force to be reckoned with. Their numbers were large, and they were on a mission from God. They were heading toward the land the Lord promised to them. As the surrounded nations saw them coming, fear arose. Balak, the man who was king of Moab, realized he could not defeat Israel. Even if he could, the casualties would be immense. Instead, he concocted a way to win without going to war. He hired a local prophet named Balaam and gave him the task of placing a curse on Israel. Now, this passage presents us with a raft

of questions. Did Balaam have real power to curse Israel? Would what he said come true even if he opposed the people of God? What were the spiritual forces at work in the world at that time?

Now, we may have similar questions today. Can people that do not walk with the Lord have real spiritual power? We won't be able to answer all of these questions today, but we will be looking more closely at them in the days ahead. Suffice it to say that Balaam was known far and wide to be a prophet. He had gifts, and even the Jewish people come to see this. This means that, yes, the Lord bestowed prophetic powers on this man even though he was not of Israel. (As an aside: We will find out later that Balaam brings great hardship to Israel.) This is also true in our world. God blesses people of various backgrounds with spiritual insight and wisdom, although we know that the things of God require the Spirit of God to reveal them to us. What we are going to find is that Balak cannot hire Balaam to say just anything he wants. Later we hear Balaam say: *Even if Balak were to give me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the Lord my God.* What this means is that while the Lord may dispense powers as he chooses, no one can go beyond what the Lord provides. That is, there are limits to these powers bestowed by God that are set by God. So even today, the Lord may provide extraordinary insight to people of different faiths or even of no particular faith, but he also limits these insights and the use of these gifts. So yes, your unbelieving family member may be a bearer of truth from God you need to hear. Your atheist coworker or professor may be gifted by God to help lead you into truth. Now, of course, Balaam would like to think he has these powers in and of himself, but that is not the case. They are always given, and they always depend on the giver. Now, we see this truth in action as the Apostle Paul quotes pagan poets during his visit to Athens. They could see an important truth that *in God we live and breathe and have our being.* Now, for us, this means we should be willing to listen to the input of outsiders. This calls for a humble and discerning ear, that we might sift the truth from the lie but also be ready to learn from others, even those that seem to us to be far from God. We rejoice to know that God rules over all the powers and principalities of this world in which we are living. We can rest in that today.

Let's pray:

Faithful Father, we too easily shut our ears to the insights of others. Thank you that your foolishness is wiser than our wisdom. Also, we thank you that all things are ours in Christ. That you alone are Lord over all, and that we can trust in you. Give us eyes to see you at work in the world, revealing yourself at every turn. Remind us that your ways are so much higher than our ways and your thoughts than our thoughts. For we pray in your name. Amen.

Thursday, August 12

I remember years ago hearing the story of Billy Graham going to the world congress on evangelism in Europe. While there, he met an African man that had suffered immense persecution from his own people. Years ago, while away from his village, this man heard the gospel. He responded to the message and entered into the truth about Christ. He was excited to return to his village and tell his own people the truth. But, when he explained what he learned to his village elders, he was beaten and removed from the community. The young man could not understand how such good news would be received in this way. He repeatedly returned to share the gospel with his own people, and he found worse treatment from them each time. Billy Graham was overwhelmed by this man's persistence and all that he had endured for the gospel. He bent down before this man and told him, "I am not worthy to untie your shoes." He recognized the greater evangelist. Now, yesterday, we began looking at the story of Balaam, the pagan prophet hired to place a curse on Israel. Here's what happened next. The Lord told Balaam that he could go and visit Balak but that he could not join Balak's plan to curse Israel. Balaam had other ideas.

Here's our text for today:

Numbers 22:24-28

²⁴ Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path through the vineyards, with walls on both sides. ²⁵ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. So he beat the donkey again. ²⁶ Then the angel of the LORD moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. ²⁷ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it lay down under Balaam, and he was angry and beat it with

his staff. ²⁸ Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"

Yes, this is enough to make us laugh out loud. Balaam decides to place a curse on Israel, and the Lord sends an angel to stop him on the way. Balaam cannot see the angel of the Lord but his donkey could. So, his donkey moved to avoid the angel. Finally, there was no room to navigate around the angel, so the donkey spoke to Balaam. Now, none of us like hearing "no" from anyone, Balaam included. But this is what the Lord told him. Now, the false prophet is hearing from one greater than himself, his own donkey. What a scene this must have been. Balaam was so angry, he could kill his donkey, but in truth, the donkey was protecting his life! As we process what happened, it is helpful if we apply this in our own lives. We want the Lord to refuse our requests. How do you feel when you know the Lord answers "no" to your prayer? We assume that God will see things our way, or that we should be able to do as we please. Do we have a God that can disappoint us, a God that can decline our requests? Or, do we expect God to always approve our plans and answer our prayers "yes"? If God must always affirm our plans, then we are not following the living God at all. We are following our wish dream, our own will. If so, we really have the wrong concept of God. Balaam is getting a much-needed lesson from the true and living God. He may have prophetic powers, but God rules over all.

Now, back to the story of the African evangelist's encounter with Billy Graham. At first, God closed the door for him to return to his village. His own people just would not listen. But over time, and with his persistence, he did return and face the elders of this village. Seeing the scars from the wounds he received from their abuse and seeing his love for them, the leading members of the villages could see Jesus. They came to believe. Jesus is our great prophet who, in the garden while in anguished prayer, received the Father's "no" so that we might have the Father's "yes." We who were dead have been made alive in Christ. Now this doesn't mean that God will always say "yes" to us but that if God is for us, then who can be against us. It means that we can count on the fact that when God says "no" to our requests, it is for our good and for his glory.

Let us pray together:

Holy God, we want what we want, and that means we will not take "no" for an answer. Nonetheless, we rejoice that you are God, and we are not. We are grateful that you tell us "no" when this is what we need. Help us to trust you when you do, and live to the honor of your name. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Friday, August 13

Years ago now, Sandy and I were invited to the 60th birthday party of a very wealthy member of our community. I did not feel exceptionally close to this man, but it seemed like an opportunity to become closer friends. At the party, no expense was spared. Tables were filled with the best food. There was no shortage of wine. Entertainment had been brought in to make the evening truly special. As Sandy and I circulated around and met the other guests, two things stuck out to me. First, while there was an enormous amount of food, there really were not many people at the party. Second, after meeting everyone that was there, we realized we were the only people there that did not work for this man. How many friends did he have? For us, what began as a celebration ended in that sad realization.

Now, here is our text for today:

Numbers 23:6-12

So he went back to him and found him standing beside his offering, with all the Moabite officials. ⁷ Then Balaam spoke his message: "Balak brought me from Aram, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains. 'Come,' he said, 'curse Jacob for me; come, denounce Israel.' ⁸ How can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the LORD has not denounced? ⁹ From the rocky peaks I see them, from the heights I view them. I see a people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations. ¹⁰ Who can count the dust of Jacob or number even a fourth of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my final end be like theirs!" ¹¹ Balak said to Balaam, "What have you done to me? I brought you to curse my enemies, but you have done nothing but bless them!" ¹² He answered, "Must I not speak what the LORD puts in my mouth?"

Now, let's recap the story of Balaam and Balak. Balak, the ruler of Moab, saw Israel coming in his direction. Israel presented a threat to his people and his rule. He desired victory without war if at all possible. So, he hired a well-known prophet from the area named Balaam to place a curse on Israel. The Lord intervened in this plan and would not allow Balaam to curse his people. The Lord did, however, allow Balaam to visit Balak. Balaam let Balak think that everything was going according to plan. The scene was set. Balak had the appropriate altar built and everything that Balaam would need to fulfill his contract. At the last moment, instead of cursing Israel, he actually blesses Israel. The story unfolds like the drama of a contract killer that becomes friends with the person he is hired to kill. Then the two of them return to hunt down the man that paid the contract. It's a pretty amazing story. Here's the thing to notice. It is one thing when your friends praise you, when you get compliments from those already in your corner. We expect this. There is nothing surprising in this. But what happens when an adversary gives you an honest compliment? That is something to pay attention to. You can imagine Balak's shock when the prophet he pays to curse Israel fails to do that. What is worse, Balaam actually delivers a blessing. We would expect the prophets of Israel to bless their own people, but not an outsider, a prophet that does not care about Israel.

Now, let's return to the party we attended. Of course, the people on his payroll will be there. They have to turn up. But what about people that do not have to attend? It turns out that they are the real wealth the man has, not the ability to throw a lavish party. No, it is the friends that actually love him and not his money. We found this man to be quite poor indeed. Scripture says that, in the end, every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. Every knee will bow. This does not mean that God will force people to their knees to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord. No, it means that even opposers and adversaries will see the truth. In the end, the truth of Jesus' identity as our servant king will be clear for all to see. Now, as we think about this passage, we rejoice that we have friends that bless us, and that is good. But, are we living in such a way that even our adversaries will bless us, even those that oppose us will see our love for them? This really is the call of the gospel.

Here is 1 Peter 2:12:

Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Let us pray:

Gracious and loving Father, we are tempted to love those that love us, and to hate those that hate us. But we know this is not the way of Jesus. Teach us how to love our enemies and to return good even to those that oppose us. In the process, let them see Jesus, the one that died so that enemies might become friends. For we pray in his name. Amen.

Saturday, August 14

Usually when we are on road trips, Sandy will read aloud to me from the book we are working through. During our most recent drive, she read, *The Great Divorce*, by C.S. Lewis. If you are not familiar with this volume, it is C.S. Lewis' fictional account of Heaven and Hell. Now, I won't give you the plot but only a few insights gathered from this little volume. One of the most surprising depictions of hell is that Lewis says the people in hell can leave any time they want to. Yes, they could board a bus and be in heaven. But they can't because they are stuck. They are stuck in their attitudes. They are stuck in their arrogance and pride. Their ingrained patterns of life keep them there.

Now, we have, this week, been looking at the story of Balak, king of Moab, and Balaam, the pagan prophet hired by Balak to curse Israel. Yesterday, we found Balaam blessing Israel instead of cursing them. He could only speak what the Lord allowed. But true to form, this didn't hinder Balak. He didn't give up. Balak took Balaam to another place, a mountaintop where he could actually see Israel. Maybe he needed to be able to see the people he was going to curse. But, no, Balaam couldn't fulfill his contract; he couldn't curse Israel there either. Balak still did not give up. He took him to another place overlooking the deep desert because, maybe looking at Israel, he could not curse them. But that didn't work either. If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Each time, Balaam could not curse Israel. In the end, Balaam cursed Moab and the surrounding countries.

Here's our text for today:

Numbers 24:15-19

Then he spoke his message: "The prophecy of Balaam son of Beor, the prophecy of one whose eye sees clearly, ¹⁶ the prophecy of one who hears the words of God, who has knowledge from the Most High, who sees a vision from the Almighty, who falls prostrate, and whose eyes are opened: ¹⁷ "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the people of Sheth. ¹⁸ Edom will be conquered; Seir, his enemy, will be conquered, but Israel will grow strong. ¹⁹ A ruler will come out of Jacob and destroy the survivors of the city."

Balaam, in his next prophecy, calls out the surrounding nations one by one explaining that each, with the exception of one, will fall. Balaam, the man hired to curse Israel, blesses them and curses the others. Only one of the nations makes peace with Israel. But here's the thing. None of this changes the heart of Balak, nor of Balaam. They do not see the power of the Lord and repent. They do not turn to the true and living God. In the end, they find another way to curse the people of God. Here's what they do. Together they concoct a plan to use Moabite women to entice the Jewish men to be unfaithful to the Lord.

Here are the opening words of Numbers 25:

While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, ² who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. ³ So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor

Balak can't get Balaam to curse Israel, but they can draw the Jewish men into sexual immorality and idol worship. They find a weak spot for Israel and wreak havoc. This doesn't remove the curse from Moab, but it brings pain and misery to Israel. Returning to the Great Divorce, though it is a work of fiction, I think it is right. People cannot change their own hearts. Even presented with evidence of the truth, even before the face of the living God, they will keep living as they always have. People could leave hell, but they won't. This means we have our place with God not because we are smarter or have stronger will or are more faithful. We are who we are because of grace. It is nothing but grace, pure and simple. God has loved us and has given us new hearts and is renewing our minds in Christ Jesus.

As we read in the New Testament:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. Ephesians 2:8-9

We have nothing to brag about. We didn't save ourselves. We would not be able to see the truth, or come to God on our own. We would just keep on living the way we always have. But the good news is that God saved us by grace. This is a faith we did not work up or produce. It is not achieved but received. That is where we stand.

Let's pray together:

Almighty God, we don't know why you have chosen us. We know we did not choose you. Only by your Spirit do we have life and peace, and true freedom. Protect us from the pride of thinking we are somehow better than others. Remind us each day that what we have is all gift. Help us to rest secure in your faithful love for us. For we pray in your name. Amen.