

STAY AWAY FROM THE EDGE

To escape the oppressive summer heat in the city, my father would take us up to the mountains. As we neared the top, we would stop at this lookout point to get a picturesque view of the winding, zigzagging road and the rugged, rocky ravines below.

To prevent people from falling over, there was this chain barricade, warning signs posted and a bright, wide yellow strip with the words painted on it: KEEP BEHIND THE LINE.

There were other families at that lookout, and there were these boys jostling and pushing each other over that line. My father would sternly tell us, "Stay far away from that line so you don't risk falling over the edge."

We have the same warning from God our Father.

The Bible is God's words in print. It is our indispensable instruction manual that provides us with the right way to live.

Within the pages of the Bible are examples that teach us only God's way works. The Bible also provides examples of individuals who refused to heed God's instructions and stubbornly chose to go their own way, which inevitably leads to catastrophe and tragedy.

One such individual was Balaam (Numbers 22:5-25).

The name Balaam means "destroyer of the people," "lord of the people" or "devourer."

He lived in Pethor, a city in northern Mesopotamia; located on the west bank of the Euphrates, some 12 miles south of Carchemish and about 400 miles north of Moab.

Pethor had the unsavory reputation of being a city of magicians and sorcerers.

And Balaam was regarded as the most powerful magician and the most renowned practitioner of sorcery at that time.

King Balak of the Moabites learnt what the Israelite army under Joshua had done to the Amorites. And now this same Israelite army was camped in his own backyard. Together with his Midianite allies, Balak was afraid that they were next to be overrun.

So Balak sent messengers to Balaam with a large amount of gold and silver to pay Balaam to curse Israel (Numbers 22:16-18).

However, God told Balaam “You shall not go with them; you are not to curse this people, for they are blessed” (verse 12).

Upon learning of Balaam’s refusal, King Balak — believing Balaam was holding out for more money — sends a company of higher-ranked princes to Balaam with more gold and silver to convince him to change his mind (verse 15).

Balaam desired the larger quantities of gold and silver the Moabites were dangling before him. He was willing to harm Israel. But God would not give him the power to do it.

Balaam then goes with Balak’s emissaries to tell him personally, “I can only do what God tells me” (verse 38). Finally, Balak — exasperated from hearing only blessings and not curses — and Balaam — frustrated he could not GET his hands on the gold and silver he so ardently coveted — went their separate ways (Numbers 24:25).

Balaam lusted for the gold and silver that Balak offered him. His greed, his lust was insatiable. But God had imposed a limit on Balaam. He could only do what God told him to do. He could only go as far as God told him he could go.

Through Balaam, God provides us with a very important principle that we must always keep in mind.

God repeatedly and very clearly gave Balaam a very simple command: you will speak only those words I tell you to. You will do only those things I allow you to do. God drew a line, and Balaam was not to cross it.

But, obsessed with the gold, Balaam — in his heart — decided he was going to get as close to that line as he could without crossing it. He may not have ACTUALLY crossed the line. But in his heart, he already had.

And so, in his insatiable quest to acquire the gold, he disobeyed God.

And, fueled by his greed (Jude 1:11), Balaam became a casualty of his own maneuverings and schemes (Numbers 31:8).

God warns us that this kind of twisted thinking puts our spiritual well-being in serious danger.

The enticement to sin is very powerful.

Satan wants us to run full-steam towards that line and cross over so we end up like Balaam did.

We must not let anything motivate us to get as close to that line of sin as we can without crossing it.

We need to stay far away from sin and stay as close as we can to God's righteousness instead.

In a practical way, how do we do that?

The answer is to abhor evil and cleave to that which is good (Romans 12:9). The apostle Paul urges us to "keep away from evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:22).

Sin is breaking God's law (1 John 3:4). And the penalty of sin is death (Romans 6:23).

The Bible tells us to get as far away from wrongdoing and as close as we can to obeying God by keeping His law.

We are to keep the letter of the law; but, more importantly, we must keep the spirit or the intent of the law as well (Matthew 5:27-28). And that's how we abhor evil, keep away from sin and hold fast to that which is good.

When we know where that danger zone is, we run as far as we can to escape the danger of crossing that line and falling over the edge.

Jesus Christ Himself is telling us, "You have a crown with your name on it. Hold fast to it" (Revelation 3:11). By holding fast to our crown, valuing it, treasuring and cherishing it, we make sure we stay way back from that line.

We stay as far away as we can from the wages of unrighteousness that Balaam loved and craved after (2 Peter 2:15).

We become more fully involved in keeping the letter AND the intent of the law as our way of life.

So, let's heed God's warning to stay way back of that line and avoid falling over the edge!