

Asses and Elders

And 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?" Then Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a mockery of me! If there had been a sword in my hand, I would have killed you by now." The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I ever been accustomed to do so to you?" And he said, "No." Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed all the way to the ground. (Numbers 22:28-31 NASB95)

Numbers 22 records the story of Balaam and his quest to service the King of Moab's desire to sidetrack Israel. In spite of warnings to the contrary, Balaam is on the road to earn some big bucks by cursing Israel for King Balak. His donkey apparently has more sense, however, and attempts to derail Balaam's travel plans three different times, when she sees the Angel of the Lord barring the way. After three such attempts and receiving beatings for her efforts, God opens the mouth of the donkey, and she rebukes Balaam for beating her.

God uses a talking donkey to make one last merciful attempt at driving home the point that Balaam should only do the Word of God. Donkeys are normally gentle but are also much more into self-preservation than say, horses, which is why they have developed a reputation for stubbornness and can be hard to keep on a path. They also don't talk (that I know of), at least in a manner we can understand very well, except for maybe the Donkey in 'Shrek' which won't shut up. Although sometimes their behavior can show that they are much smarter than their riders, talking sense is just completely out of character for them.

Still, God continues to use donkeys to talk sense every once in a while. I'm speaking of the two legged kind, in particular. This type of donkey, like the cute furry kind, is not known for talking sense. Most of the time, they sound (and act) remarkably similar to their long-eared cousins. But God, in His infinite love, causes donkeys to talk all the time. His truth can be heard everywhere, because all truth is God's truth. From godless evolutionary scientists warning of tectonic disaster, to musicians (secular or 'religious') singing heartfelt melodies based on misguided feelings, to the televangelist preaching 'Jesus loves you' in between pleas for more money, God sometimes turns the braying of even the most stubborn ass into words of wisdom.

Truth is God's province. He is the source of all truth; He is truth. *"I am the way, the truth, and the life."* (John 14:6) If any person speaks or does something that is not God, it is not truth, and he or she is just braying. Truth helps us adjust our lives to God's wholeness and perfection. When we hear truth, and change our behavior to obey it, we harmonize with God.

So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:31-32 NASB95)

All humans must adjust to God's truth in order to have access to Him and all the blessings that flow from a right relationship with Him. We can 'feel' like we are right, but truth overrides feelings and gets to the heart, confronting us with a choice. Either conform to His love, by His

ways, or be expelled from His wonderful presence. Love rejoices in the truth (1 Corinthians 13:6). True love and caring are intimately connected with the truth. So when some donkey is just braying instead of speaking truth, he or she is not truly caring for the people they are braying at. We need to hear the truth of God's Word on a regular basis, and aggressively adjust ourselves to it, in order to continue to be transformed from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. "*Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ.*" (Romans 10:17) For additional study see John 3:21; Romans 1:18, 1:25, 2:8; Ephesians 4:14-16; 2 Thessalonians 2:10-13; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Timothy 2:15-26; 1 Peter 1:22,23; 2 Peter 2:1-3.

I've learned from donkeys, myself (and brayed like one too, truth be told). Even as dense as I am, sometimes, I have picked up on a message here and there. God has used people around me, even if they normally don't live the truth of God's Word, to remind me that I need to live and speak His Word alone. I hear His truth from the strangest people. For instance, I hear it from 'donkeys' such as music artists a lot, even from bands like Black Sabbath. In my opinion, their song 'War Pigs/Luke's Wall' speaks the truth of spiritual warfare in a way much more piercing than any so-called 'Christian' artist I ever heard has managed.

"Now in darkness world stops turning; ashes where the bodies burning. No more war pigs have the power; hand of God has struck the hour. Day of judgment God is calling, on their knees the war pigs crawling. Begging mercies for their sins, Satan laughing spreads his wings. Oh Lord yeah!"

A few words, in between the rest of their braying, powerfully blasting forth. And it does blast, depending on how loud your stereo is. (Personally, I think music should be experienced, not just 'heard.' But hey, what do you expect from a drummer?) Three or four lines, forged like a sword in a furnace, cut through the braying as if sent straight from the Throne room to Ozzy (Osbourne, the lead singer of Black Sabbath). I find that supposedly godless people seem to talk more about spiritual realities than those who claim His name. Perhaps it is because they are so acutely aware of His absence. Secular musicians frequently express the torment of a soul apart from God, ever seeking to be filled with the things of this world or the flesh yet never being filled. Characters in movies do the same thing. For instance, the movie 'Pirates of the Caribbean' offers an excellent testimony to life oriented around the love of money, in addition to being a fun movie to watch. Geoffrey Rush's character, Captain Barbossa, in a conversation with his captive, describes exactly what a person can expect from the worship of gold. The movie also illustrates what 'eternal life' without God is like. It's enough to scare the hell out of you.

Other sources of braying, with occasional truth accidentally thrown in, include newspapers, magazines, and the television. I don't reject any of these sources out of hand; I just have to sift them on a regular basis. I figure the media has about half truth and half lies, and it takes effort to determine which is which. It helps to limit my attention to scanning – read or listen to the first paragraph or intro, and the last paragraph or wrap up, and maybe hit the highlights in between. I don't pay attention to any braying that says 'this or that may happen,' because what do they know? I ignore brayings on evolution, because they are just intended to indoctrinate, not educate. I also don't watch TV much because of the braying in the commercials (almost no truth there). The mainstream media has lost its' once-storied desire to educate and inform, along with the last rags of its' integrity, and is frequently nothing more than donkeys on parade. But, there

is still some truth to be found and we can learn from them. Most of us just know better than to blindly accept everything they say.

Speaking of donkeys in movies, some elders have turned their congregations into the ecclesiastical equivalent of a multiplex theater, where you can get your braying on 16 screens, with stadium seating and Dolby digital surround sound. Entertainment has become the goal, and even the choosiest church shopper can find something to appeal to the most discriminating of tastes in such a place. One stop shopping, as it were. "It must be good" goes the thinking, because there are so many people who attend. Numbers equate to validation of the message. Small churches become jealous and want to 'get big' like the mega-church, thinking that size really does matter. The problem is, if this were true, then the theater itself is more 'truth-filled' than any so-called mega-church, because the multiplex can pack them in every day of the week. Even with reruns. Not only that, but the 'truth' of the multiplex costs a lot of money to view, which must confirm the reasoning that 'numbers validate truth' because so many are willing to pay so much. Can a person learn from the multi, er, I mean, the mega church? Of course. Big or little, it's not the size that matters but what is being taught and practiced. Learning can be extracted in the exact same way that we can get truth from the multiplex theater, from Black Sabbath, or from a godless scientist. If God can cause a donkey to speak He can certainly make the donkeys in the mega-church (or the mini-church) speak truth.

And speaking of the pulpit, God has donkeys speaking truth occasionally there, too. Some elders are eloquent speakers, some are brilliant theologians, and some have been truly called into the ministry by God. Notice I'm saying all those are not the same. Unfortunately, too many were just called into the ministry by their mommies (jennies?). Nevertheless, I have learned from them, and you have, too. Like a newspaper or a movie, we might have to sift a lot, or sit through some loud braying, but yes, we learn. We may have only gotten a little milk, or a caution to avoid their example, but there is some good in almost any teaching. Fortunately God is in charge, not the donkeys, and He makes sure enough truth gets through to help us in spite of the incessant braying most other times.

Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice, ... (Philippians 1:15-18 NASB95)

But is a talking donkey the best way to hear from God? Shouldn't we seek the whole Word of the Lord, directly, in the first place, as Balaam should have done when God told him not to go (verse 12) or when He told Balaam "only the Word which I speak to you shall you do?" (verse 20) Balaam didn't pay enough attention to God at the first, so he ended up being taught by a donkey (and not learning very well, by the way). In the same way, it would be better for us to go direct to the Source, get the whole of God's Word, and obey it, than wait and get it in between brayings. The donkey wasn't God's first choice. It would have been better for Balaam to listen to all of His Word directly. So wouldn't it be better and more desirable for us to seek Him where His whole Word is taught instead of hearing only part of it from a donkey? God wants to be able to guide us with a glance, and we need instruction in obedience to all of His Word in order to

respond to His eye. He longs for us to move at the merest look or the lightest touch, without having to be yanked here and there by bit and bridle (much less to having to be taught by a donkey).

I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you. Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding, whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check, otherwise they will not come near to you. (Psalm 32:8-9 NASB95)

It's true that God can use anything or anyone to get a message across. Even a completely useless person can always be used as a bad example. One can usually learn from even the worst teacher or the most ridiculous church elder, too. I have often wondered why God tolerates so many of these types of self-proclaimed ministries. How come He doesn't just zap them like Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10? I have come to the conclusion that God lets most of the church governments and elders continue to exist, though virtually useless for most things, because while braying at the top of their lungs God can still cause some good words to come out here and there. Every once in a while someone actually benefits from even the poorest teaching or preaching.

However, the best way to learn is not by the braying of asses, but by the whole truth of God. A congregation that seeks to find and live His truths is one that truly loves, and one that would love me. We need to hear the whole truth on a regular basis and see it for ourselves in our own studies, and learn by watching the practice of others while practicing it daily on our own. We shouldn't be waiting hungrily for a few scraps of truth to accidentally fall from the lips of donkeys. We should be getting filled with the rich nutrients of God's Bread, His Milk and His Meat, by purposeful teaching and practice from the whole of God's Word. Just because truth can be found anywhere, and just because a donkey can be made to speak the truth, does not mean that we should be populating our congregational government with asses.

Nor does it mean that we should turn ourselves into a multiplex. Truth, unfortunately, is not popular. It requires too much self-sacrifice, too much long distance cross carrying, too much love and caring. The road is too narrow, the way too hard, for people to be lining up and paying big bucks just to get a peek. As a matter of fact, if our message is really, really popular, then we should probably reexamine what we are teaching, because something must be wrong if it appeals to that many people. Even if it is 'purpose driven' or direct from Jabez himself.

As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:14-16 NASB95)

I encourage you to look for a congregation that teaches and practices the whole Word of God, instead of just parts of it. Ideally, elders should be able to live and teach God's Word on purpose, not by accidentally blurting out the truth in spite of his (or her) best intentions otherwise. If he is immersed in God's Word, living it himself as well as preaching it to others, then, instead of braying a lot and sometimes truth coming out, it will be the other way around. Look for, or start if you have to, a congregation where the leadership leads by conscious effort,

guided by the eye of God in all they do. We all make mistakes, and elders aren't immune. That's why we are supposed to function as a body. When one member hurts we all hurt. But for an elder who stays committed to the Word of God, with no additions or subtractions, even the mistakes are a beautiful learning and teaching tool for you, demonstrating the real and whole love of God. Oscar Wilde once said, "True friends stab you in the front." He echoes the biblical thought that "*Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy*" (Proverbs 27:6). A person who will not speak the whole truth of God to you, even if it hurts sometimes, is not your friend but an enemy.

Don't settle for the braying of donkeys, but insist on all of the sweet words of our Messiah. The whole enchilada; all the marbles; the whole shootin' match; the works; the whole kit and caboodle; the entire Word of our God. Learn on purpose, not on accident. Don't stop at an ear-tickling multiplex; move on to a place or create one where you'll be challenged and grow in intimacy with your God. Where there is too much braying, there is not enough caring or love. Life is way too short to be sitting through a tirade of hee-hawing, gleaned a few meager words of truth here and there, slowly wasting away through malnutrition.

Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. (Ephesians 4:25 NASB95)

Even if you want to stay where you are, fill yourself with all of the Words of God, diligently practicing them, and don't sit there meeting after meeting allowing the asses to have the last word. Ask questions. Just because they are in leadership doesn't make them right. Require them to explain their braying, and give you references. Look up the references they give you, and be prepared to dig in and really work at understanding.

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. (Ephesians 5:6-10 NASB95)

I don't mean that you only have asses for leaders, or that you should question or argue just for the sake of arguing. Just don't take what the elders say lying down, hoping against hope that meaningful truth will pop out. And I also don't mean that a mega-church is necessarily bad just because it is big. But if you are not hearing the whole Word of God where you are, even if you are learning a little here and there anyway, then go somewhere else. Shoot, go to the multiplex movie theater instead. It's more fun, the donkeys there speak occasional truth as well, and you get popcorn and coke as a bonus.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 John 4:1 NASB95)

I echo the sentiment above by saying, beloved, to test the spirits where you are. If your elders are braying, for instance, that part of God's wonderful Word is 'old' and that it doesn't apply anymore; or if they say that part of His Word is for Jews only and other parts are for everyone else; if they concentrate too much on cultural or genetic differences or number of houses instead of the single-mindedness of the Christ; if they say that Israel has been replaced by the 'church,' and take the blessings for themselves while leaving the curses for Israel (Balaam's folly); then

they are adding or subtracting which God tells us is a no-no. *“Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it. (Deuteronomy 12:32 NASB95, see also Deuteronomy 4:2)*

If an elder says that His bread is ‘death;’ if he tells you that being ‘anti-tradition’ is the same as being ‘anti-God’s Word;’ if you ask questions and don’t get answers on a regular basis; if he says ‘touch not the Lord’s anointed’ because you tell him his message can’t be found in the Word, for your own benefit you need to get away from him. If they say “we minister in a certain way, and if you aren’t being ministered to then you need to find a place where you are” then believe them. If they can’t give Scriptural answers for the questions you ask; if they spiritualize the Word into practical oblivion; if they fail to give practical guidance from the Word for daily living; if they don’t practice what they know is the truth; **then don’t listen to them**, no matter how entertaining the message or how many screens it is playing on. If you aren’t getting the whole Word of God, which is how real caring and love is given, then move on to another group, or start your own. Better to experience the difficulties of pursuing righteousness for a season than to slowly decay in the warmth of our comfort zones for a lifetime.

To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn. (Isaiah 8:20 NASB95)

Unfortunately, Balaam did not listen to God and tried to curse the Israelites anyway. Money turned his head and he took a different path. And, just as God turned a donkey’s braying into words of truth, so also He turned the braying of Balaam into words of blessing. Many in our day have also turned their heads towards money, and attempt to add or subtract to or from the whole of God’s Word. They will not do specifically and only what God tells us to do. God changes the message so truth still comes out, but it is better to seek truth from the source than to learn from a donkey. May our Father bless you and your family as you seek to do His Will, forsaking the pleasures of the world or the ear-tickling sermons of the mega-plex, I mean the multi-church, I mean, oh whatever, to follow Him no matter what the cost. Shalom.

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