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The Ten Commandments

Scripture: Exodus 19:1-20:21

Theme: God's law shows us His character and our need for a Savior

High School (Ages 15-18)

Free curriculum for small and rural churches

Lesson Overview

Lesson Overview: Balaam's Donkey: God Speaks in Unexpected Ways This lesson explores how God often chooses the unlikely, whether through the mouths of animals, the voices of marginalized voices, or the lives of those society dismisses, to reveal truth and advance His redemptive purposes (Num. 22:21, 35). At its heart, this passage challenges high school students to consider: When God's Word feels silenced in our world (e.g., in oppression, silence, or cultural rejection), whose voice does He use to break through? Theologically, it invites reflection on the sovereignty of God over creation, where even donkeys and prophets serve as instruments of divine revelation, echoing themes in Scripture of God's ability to use anyone to fulfill His will (cf. Isa. 40:28). Real-world application could tie into conversations about witnessing in marginalized communities, where God's truth often finds expression through the least expected. **Encouragement for Teachers:** Lean into the paradox, how can we trust God when His ways are messy or unrecognized? This lesson thrives on dialogue: What does it look like to "hear" God's voice in our own lives when the world tells us we're irrelevant? Keep it brief but dig into one or two key connections (e.g., divine sovereignty vs. human limitations) to spark deeper discussion.

Bible Story

Balaam's Donkey: God Speaks Through Unlikely Mouths (Numbers 22:21, 35)

Balaam, a prophet of God, had been summoned by Balak, the king of Moab, to curse Israel before they marched into the Promised Land. Though Balaam was a man of wisdom and reputation, his relationship with God was complicated, he had been called to prophecy, yet his heart sometimes wavered. The Lord had once told him, "Do not go with them" (Numbers 22:12), but his response was ambiguous: "Who am I, that I should oppose God?" (v. 13). The text suggests Balaam's words were more about his own limited perspective than absolute obedience, revealing that even holy men struggle with human doubts. Here, God's command isn't absolute, but Balaam's hesitation hints at a deeper tension:

How much power does our faith have when it's mixed with ambition or fear?

The moment Balaam and his team began the journey, God intervened. Not through Balaam's voice, but through his donkey, a creature so insignificant it was often overlooked. The donkey, a symbol of God's sovereignty over all creation (Genesis 1:24, 25), suddenly turned aside, refusing to continue. Balaam, furious, struck the animal with a rod (v. 25), assuming it was disobeying him. But God's message came through the donkey's unspoken resistance: "I am your enemy" (v. 27). The donkey's action was a divine intercession, exposing Balaam's blindness to see God's hand at work. This isn't a story about animals as messengers, but about how God's voice can be misheard when we ignore the signs around us. The donkey's defiance was a warning: Even in rebellion, God speaks.

Balaam's anger led him to another strike, this time, he hit the donkey's nose with the rod. Once more, the animal turned, this time not just from its own free will, but because God struck it with blindness (v. 28). Here, God's power is clear: He doesn't just let His servants be corrected; He ensures they understand. The donkey's blindness became a tool of revelation, forcing Balaam to confront his own willfulness. The question arises: When does obedience become submission, and when does defiance become rebellion? Balaam's reactions reveal a common struggle: we often resist God's will not because we're rebellious, but because we're confused about why He acts the way He does. His failure here was to assume his own wisdom was superior to God's mystery.

The story ends with Balaam's realization. Though he initially resisted, he later obeyed, though not without hesitation. His response to Balak's offer to bless Israel was cautious: "Can I curse for you? If I curse, will you not bless me? That's hard" (v. 33). His words show he still wrestled with power dynamics, but his final act was submission. The donkey's don't-speak role underscores a theological truth: God's methods may be unexpected, but His intentions are always for good. The donkey didn't speak, but its actions challenged Balaam's pride, forcing him to listen. This isn't just about prophecy; it's about listening to God in ways that feel uncomfortable or inconvenient.

Why This Story Matters Today Balaam's donkey isn't just a metaphor for hearing God's voice, it's a reminder that disobedience can be a pathway to awareness. Our world often demands instant answers, but God's ways are rarely logical or convenient. Just as Balaam's donkey turned three times before he understood, we may need repeated "blindness" to see our own shortcomings. The real lesson isn't that we should blindly follow God, but that we should trust Him even when we don't understand. In a culture that glorifies independence and self-reliance, Balaam's story challenges us: God's truth is worth the cost of humility. Whether in faith, relationships, or ethics, we must ask: Where have I ignored the signs around me? The donkey's lesson is simple: God speaks in ways that challenge our comfort, not our comfort zones.

Key Verse

Exodus 20:3

Numbers 22:30 is a powerful moment where Balaam, a prophet, reflects on his unyielding obedience to God's will, even when he's tempted to seek worldly gain. His words reveal his trust in God's sovereignty, acknowledging that he has been faithful despite human temptation, and he questions whether his own desires have ever truly been his own (theological connection to self-control and divine calling). Real-world application: This verse encourages honesty about our own struggles, when do we prioritize God's plan over our own desires? Balaam's story shows that true integrity lies in aligning our hearts with God's purposes, even when it costs us comfort or opportunity.

Activities

Activity 1:

1. Script Division (5 min):
2. Divide the group into teams of 3, 5 students. Assign one team to represent Balaam, another to play the donkey, and a third to narrate/interpret.
3. Have each team read their role aloud from Numbers 22:21-35, emphasizing the donkey's defiance and God's intervention (v. 27, 30). Note: The donkey's "speech" is symbolic of divine revelation (Deuteronomy 33:22).

4. Dramatic Reenactment (7 min):
5. Ask the team playing the donkey to act out its resistance (e.g., pawing the ground, whinnying) before Balaam's blinders are removed. Use props (e.g., blindfold for Balaam or a cloth for the donkey's "mouth" to "speak").
6. Encourage the narrator to describe theological stakes: How is this a microcosm of divine communication? (e.g., God's patience, human blindness to truth, or the "unexpected" as a tool of revelation).
7. Theological Discussion (5 min):
8. Question: How does Balaam's donkey's "voice" challenge or affirm the idea that God speaks through rather than directly to humans?
9. Real-world tie: Discuss modern examples, e.g., how might a pet, a dream, or even AI serve as "witnesses" to God's presence? Explore ethical dilemmas (e.g., should we trust a "second voice"?).
10. Creative Reflection (optional, 2 min):
11. Have students draw a "moment of revelation" using the donkey as inspiration (e.g., a donkey with a halo, or a scene where God's light shines through an obstacle). Discuss how their art reflects biblical themes of hidden truth.

Activity 2:

Supplies needed:

- *Uses basic supplies with minimal prep.*

1. Preparation (3 min):
2. Divide the class into pairs. One student will be the "Balaam" (blindfolded), the other the "Donkey" (guides them to truth).
3. Provide a script-like scenario (e.g., "You're paid to curse a group of people. Your donkey resists, and God intervenes.").
4. Role-Play & Blindfolded Test (8 min):
5. The "Balaam" (blindfolded) follows the "Donkey" (who points to a text passage or object, e.g., a Bible verse like Deuteronomy 33:22). Ask: How does the donkey's guidance differ from direct instruction?
6. Step 2: Reverse roles. Discuss: Why might God use an "unexpected" guide? What does this say about divine wisdom?
7. Optional: Use a prop (e.g., a "donkey" toy) to act out the donkey's defiance and Balaam's blind spots.
8. Theological Deep Dive (5 min):
9. Key Questions:
10. Theology: How does Balaam's donkey's rebellion reflect the Bible's idea of divine sovereignty? (e.g., Job 1:9, 11).
11. Real-world application: Think of a time God revealed truth indirectly (e.g., through a friend, a book, or even a dream). How did you respond? Was it easy or challenging?
12. Moral dilemma: If God could have made Balaam see directly, why did He use a donkey? Why might God use "blind spots" in our lives as tools for growth?
13. Creative Writing (optional, 3 min):
14. Ask students to write a short response (1, 2 sentences) to: "What 'unexpected' voice or witness has influenced your faith journey?" Share with a partner.
15. Key Theological Connections Across Activities:
16. Divine Sovereignty: God's control over even the donkey's actions (v. 31) contrasts with human resistance (v. 32, 35).
17. Prophetic Tradition: The donkey's role echoes ancient Near Eastern myths (e.g., a talking animal as a divine messenger).
18. Real-world parallels: How might students apply this to modern "messengers" of truth (e.g., social media, science, or even animals' behaviors).

19. Why These Work for High Schoolers:

20. Engagement: Drama and role-play keep it interactive, while reflection ties to their own experiences.

21. Critical thinking: Challenges assumptions about divine communication and human agency.

Discussion Questions

- Here are four intellectually engaging, open-ended discussion questions designed to foster deep reflection on Balaam's Donkey, its theological themes, biblical nuances, and real-world applications:
- Theological Perspective & Divine Silence
- Balaam's donkey repeatedly speaks to him, while Balaam remains blind to God's presence. How might this story challenge traditional views of how God communicates, particularly when divine revelation seems unexpected (e.g., through animals, dreams, or even divine silence)? Consider how modern people (or you as a believer) might struggle with this tension: Does God's silence today require us to ask, "Where is He speaking?" differently than in ancient Israel? Use the donkey's role to argue for a nuanced understanding of divine interaction.
- Prophetic Integrity & Human Bias
- Balaam initially acts on the donkey's warning, but ultimately disobeys God to profit from his role as a prophet. Many prophets in Scripture faced similar dilemmas (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah). How does Balaam's story expose the conflict between human ambition (e.g., wealth, power) and prophetic integrity? Does this passage force you to reconsider whether we can ever truly separate our "motivations" from God's commands? How might this apply to modern "prophets" (e.g., influencers, politicians, or even teachers) who use their influence for personal gain?
- Intertextuality & Prophecy's Unreliable Sources
- Numbers 22, 24 paints a complex picture of Balaam's role as a "seer" with mixed motives. If we assume this was a real prophetic encounter, why might God allow Balaam's "success" despite his corruption? Later prophets (like Ezekiel or Daniel) often wrestle with how to reconcile God's justice with the fallibility of His messengers. How does this story force you to think about the limits of prophecy, and why might the Bible preserve such moments where divine truth is tampered with? What does this say about the reliability of God's Word in the face of human failings?
- Real-World Application: When "Truth" Collides with "Opportunity"
- The story of Balaam's donkey forces a confrontation between divine will and human opportunity. Today, this tension plays out in many areas:
- Ethics in Media/Propaganda: Some "prophets" (or leaders) use their platforms to exploit people's fears or desires for profit. How might Balaam's story help us critique modern "gurus" or social media influencers who claim divine authority?
- Religious Pluralism: If God speaks through animals, dreams, or "seers," how does this challenge assumptions about who can rightly claim to speak for Him? Does this passage offer insight into why some cultures revere animals as sacred, while others do not?
- Personal Decision-Making: When faced with a "clear" command (e.g., from a parent, teacher, or God) that conflicts with a "temptation" (e.g., greed, fear, or peer pressure), how do you reconcile the two? How might Balaam's story serve as a warning, or a mirror, to your own struggles?
- Teaching Note:
- These questions encourage students to engage with:
- Biblical theology (e.g., the nature of prophecy, divine sovereignty).
- Historical/cultural context (e.g., how "seers" functioned in ancient Near Eastern societies).
- Ethical reflection (e.g., integrity, free will, and human responsibility).
- Real-world connections (e.g., media ethics, pluralism, or personal integrity).

- Would you like any of these refined further for a specific focus (e.g., more emphasis on justice, more historical analysis)?

Prayer Focus

"Lord, You speak not only through voices we hear but through the stubborn resistance of the unseen, the reluctant witness of the earth, and the sharp tongue of creation, when we dare to listen beyond human comprehension. Teach us, as Balaam's donkey discerned Your will in a way even his master failed to see, to trust Your silence as much as Your words, and to seek wisdom not in our own reasoning, but in the unshakable truth You reveal when we are open to the strange and unexpected ways You speak." Theological Notes for Reflection: - The donkey's rebellion is not a moral failing but a divine interruption, God's plan requires unexpected witnesses to break through human resistance (cf. Gen 6:9's steadfastness vs. humanity's unbelief). - For students: How does humility in study (like Balaam's later repentance) align with the cost of truth? Where might unseen voices (e.g., intuition, art, science) carry revelations today? - Real-world application: How can we cultivate audacity to trust God's voice when it arrives in ways we don't expect, beyond our preconceived frameworks? (e.g., unpopular opinions, artistic expression, or even scientific "failures" as redemptive moments?) Optional extension: Pair with the question: "What 'donkey' in your life is resisting God's call, what's the first step to let it speak?"

>> Missions Spotlight

The Fulani people of West Africa are known as the world's largest nomadic group. Their deep connection to their herds means the story of Balaam's donkey gets immediate attention. Missionaries working across the Sahel region use this story to show that God speaks through the ordinary.

-> To the Cross

God opened the donkey's mouth to speak truth. Later, God would send His ultimate Word, Jesus, to speak truth to a world that couldn't see clearly. God always finds a way to get His message through.