Let me tell you the story of a prophet, in some respects a very great prophet but one “who loved the wages of unrighteousness,” who “was rebuked for his iniquity” in a most strange and unusual way, and whose actions (which included the uttering of great and true prophecies) were described by another prophet in another day as “madness.”

This is a true story, a dramatic story; one with a great lesson for all members of the Church; one that involves seeing God, receiving revelation, and facing a destroying angel in whose hand was the sword of vengeance. It includes the account of how the Lord delivered a message to the prophet in a way that, as far as we know, has never been duplicated in the entire history of the world.

As we study the events involved, suppose we seek answer to these questions: [1] Why did the Lord permit (or did he direct) the strange series of events? [2] What are “the wages of unrighteousness”? [3] And how could a prophet who sought such remain in tune with “the spirit of God” and proclaim great things, including one of our most marvelous Messianic prophecies?

But even more important: [4] What lesson are we expected to learn from the inter-mixture of both good and bad conduct shown forth by this ancient representative of the Lord?

Now let us turn to the story, with an open mind, seeking the lesson it teaches us. And as we do so please keep in mind that everything I have so far or shall hereafter put in quote marks is copied from the Bible, except in one instance where help is sought from a passage of latter-day revelation.

Our story took place on the plains of Moab near Jericho; the time was 1451 B.C.; the chief participants were Balak, king of the Moabites, and Balaam, a prophet from the land of Midian. Israel’s hosts, numbering in the millions, had just devastated the land of the Amorites and were camped on the borders of Moab. Fear and anxiety filled the hearts of the people of Moab and Balak their king. Would they also be overrun and slaughtered by these warriors of Jehovah?

So Balak sent the elders and princes of his nation to Balaam, “with the rewards of divination in their hand,” to hire him to come and curse Israel. In Balak’s name they said: “Behold, there is a people come out from Egypt: behold, they cover the face of the earth, and they abide over against me:

“Come now therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people; for they are too mighty for me: peradventure I shall prevail, that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land: for I wot that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed.”

Anxious to gain the riches they offered him, Balaam invited them to lodge with him that night while he inquired of the Lord and sought permission to curse Israel. That night “God came unto Balaam” and said: “Thou shalt not go with them; thou shalt not curse the people: for they are blessed.”
Next morning Balaam said to the princes of Balak: “Get you into your land: for the Lord refuseth to give me leave to go with you.”

Thereupon Balak sent more honorable and noble princes than the first and they said to Balaam: “Thus saith Balak the son of Zippor, Let nothing, I pray thee, hinder thee from coming unto me:

“For I will promote thee unto very great honour, and I will do whatsoever thou sayest unto me: come therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people.

“And Balaam answered and said unto the servants of Balak, If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God, to do less or more.”

And yet, still anxious to receive the riches and honors offered by the king, Balaam lodged his visitors and importuned the Lord for permission to go with them and curse Israel.

“And God came unto Balaam at night, and said unto him, If the men come to call thee, rise up, and go with them; but yet the word which I shall say unto thee, that shalt thou do.”

After gaining this permission Balaam “saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab.”

Now note: The Lord had given Balaam permission to go, and yet the scripture says: “And God’s anger was kindled because he went: and the angel of the Lord stood in the way for an adversary against him.”

As Balaam rode along, “the ass saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand.” Three times the dumb beast turned aside, crushing Balaam’s foot against a wall and falling down under him. In anger the prophet “smote the ass with a staff.

“And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times?

“And Balaam said unto the ass, Because thou hast mocked me: I would there were a sword in mine hand, for now would I kill thee.

“And the ass said unto Balaam, Am not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden ever since I was thine unto this day? was I ever wont to do so unto thee? And he said, Nay.

“Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face.”

After rebuking and counseling Balaam, the angel yet said: “Go with the men: but only the word that I shall speak unto thee, that thou shalt speak.”

When they met, Balak renewed his promise “to promote” Balaam “to honour,” and the prophet responded: “Have I now any power at all to say any thing? the word that God putteth in my mouth, that shall I speak.”

Balak then offered sacrifices, and at the visiting prophet’s request built seven altars upon which Balaam also sacrificed, obviously pleading with the Lord for permission to curse Israel and receive the honors offered by the king of the Moabites. But with it all Balaam promised that if “the Lord will come to meet me,” then “whatsoever he sheweth me I will tell thee.”

“And God met Balaam,” and told him what to say, which he then proclaimed in the presence of all the princes of Moab: “How shall I curse, whom God hath not cursed? or how shall I defy, whom the Lord hath not defied?
“For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him: Lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.

“Who can count the dust of Jacob, and the number of the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!”

Balak was angry, but Balaam remained true to his trust, saying, “Must I not take heed to speak that which the Lord hath put in my mouth?”

Then they went through the whole process again. Sacrifices were offered; the Lord was importuned; but the result was the same.

“God is not a man,” Balaam said, “that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?

“Behold, I have received commandment to bless: and he hath blessed; and I cannot reverse it.”

Then he continued, “Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, neither is there any divination against Israel: according to this time it shall be said of Jacob and of Israel, What hath God wrought!”

When Balak yet complained, Balaam replied: “Told not I thee, saying, All that the Lord speaketh, that I must do?”

And yet at the King’s request the prophet still sought to curse Israel. Further sacrifices were offered; again pleading entreaties ascended to the Lord; and again the answer was the same. “The spirit of God came upon him,” and he prophesied with power and force of the greatness of Israel, concluding with the statement, “Blessed is he that blesseth thee, and cursed is he that curseth thee.

“And Balak’s anger was kindled against Balaam, and he smote his hands together: and Balak said unto Balaam, I called thee to curse mine enemies, and, behold, thou hast altogether blessed them these three times.

“Therefore now flee thou to thy place: I thought to promote thee unto great honour; but, lo, the Lord hath kept thee back from honour.”

But Balaam, fixed in his purpose to deliver only “that message that the Lord revealed to him, said: “Spake I not also to thy messengers which thou sentest unto me, saying,

“If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the commandment of the Lord, to do either good or bad of mine own mind; but what the Lord saith, that will I speak?”

Then, while the Spirit still rested upon him, Balaam gave this great Messianic prophecy: “I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel.”

In spite of all this, the record recites that Balaam “taught” Balak “to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication,” and shortly thereafter, while aligned against Israel in the camps of the Midianites, he was “slain with the sword.”

The full account of these events is found in Numbers 22:23; 24; 25; 31:8; 2 Peter 2:15-16; Jude 1:11; and Revelations 2:14. [Num. 22:23; Num. 24; Num. 25; Num. 31:8; 2 Pet. 2:15-16;
What a story this is! Here is a prophet of God who is firmly committed to declare only what the Lord of heaven directs. There does not seem to be the slightest doubt in his mind about the course he should pursue. He represents the Lord, and neither a house full of gold and silver nor high honors offered by the king can sway him from his determined course, which has been charted for him by that God whom he serves.

But greed for wealth and lust for honor beckon him. How marvelous it would be to be rich and powerful as well as having the prophetic powers that already are his.

Perhaps the Lord would let him compromise his standards and have some worldly prosperity and power as well as a testimony of the gospel. Of course he knew the gospel was true, as it were, but why should he be denied the things his political file leader could confer?

I wonder how often some of us get our direction from the Church and then, Balaam-like, plead for some worldly rewards and finally receive an answer which says, in effect, if you’re determined to be a millionaire or to gain this or that worldly honor, go ahead, with the understanding that you will continue to serve the Lord. Then we wonder why things don’t work out for us as well as they would have done if we had put first in our lives the things of God’s kingdom.

What are the rewards of unrighteousness? Do they not include seeking for worldly things when these run counter to the interests of the Church?

And don’t we all know people who, though they were once firm and steadfast in testimony, are now opposing the Lord’s purposes and interests on earth because money and power have twisted their judgment of what should or should not be?

Balaam, the prophet, inspired and mighty as he once was, lost his soul in the end because he set his heart on things of this world rather than the riches of eternity.

What a wealth of meaning there is in these inspired words of Joseph Smith, words addressed to people who have testimonies but want to mingle the things of this world with them: “Behold, there are many called, but few are chosen. And why are they not chosen?

“Because their hearts are set so much upon the things of this world, and aspire to the honors of men, that they do not learn this one lesson —

“That the rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven and that the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness.

“That they may be conferred upon us, it is true; but when we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man.

“Behold, ere he is aware, he is left unto himself, to kick against the pricks, to persecute the saints, and to fight against God.…

Hence many are called, but few are chosen.” (D&C 121:34–38, 40.)