

INTRODUCTION:

“WHEN THE ASS SPEAKS...YOU SHOULD LISTEN!”

Throughout history, God has often chosen the most unexpected vessels to convey His will and accomplish His purposes. These vessels, seemingly foolish or insignificant by human standards, carry profound lessons that challenge conventional understanding. The message is evident from the jawbone of a donkey wielded by Samson as a weapon to the speaking donkey in Balaam's story: *“When the ass speaks, you should listen!”*

As I read the story of Balaam and contemplated the double-minded nature of his relationship with God, people, and wealth, I noticed how his narrative mirrors that of many people in ministry—gifted individuals who are spiritually knowledgeable but do not have emotional maturity that leads to good character development. Many individuals enter the ministry without considering the importance of

character development when engaging in spiritual warfare. Adam and Eve fell prey to satan because of a lack of character development. They were tempted to disobey God due to their limited experience resisting temptation and understanding the importance and relevance of obedience, trust, and self-control. This lack of maturity provided fertile ground for the serpent's deception.

In the biblical narrative of Numbers 22:21-33, Balaam's donkey emerges as an unlikely yet pivotal character. While Balaam, a prophet, was blinded by greed and ambition, the donkey displayed spiritual insight, recognizing the angel of the Lord standing in their path. The donkey's actions, including its extraordinary speaking ability, saved Balaam from destruction. This account underscores the recurring theme in Scripture: God's wisdom often confounds human expectations, using the lowly and humble to accomplish His will.

In ministry today, this lesson is frequently overlooked, significantly when narcissistic tendencies distort spiritual leadership. Narcissistic A.S.S. leaders—Ambitious, Selfish, and Sociopathic—represent a type of leadership that prioritizes personal agendas and control over God's mission and the well-being of their congregations. Their behaviors mirror the arrogance and spiritual blindness of figures like Samson, King Saul, and Balaam, creating environments of manipulation and

harm. Understanding the contrast between such leaders and the humility of Balaam's donkey is essential in addressing and overcoming narcissistic spiritual abuse in the church.

Narcissistic A.S.S. Leaders: A Profile

Narcissistic leaders in ministry often exploit their authority, manipulate communication, and reject correction. Their leadership fosters control and division rather than unity and spiritual growth. The defining traits of these leaders include:

- **Exploitation of Authority:** They use their position to fulfill personal ambitions rather than serving God's mission.

- **Aversion to Accountability:** Constructive criticism, often called rebellion or misunderstanding, is deflected to avoid personal responsibility.

- **Dismissal of Warnings:** They ignore correction, especially from unexpected or seemingly insignificant sources, deeming such messages irrelevant.

These tendencies create toxic environments where self-centered agendas drown out the voice of God. By dismissing voices that challenge their authority, narcissistic leaders hinder spiritual discernment and growth, both for themselves and for those under their influence.

The Ass Who Saved Balaam: A Contrast in Leadership

The story of Balaam's donkey starkly contrasts the behaviors of narcissistic leaders. Despite being a lowly and overlooked animal, the donkey demonstrated qualities that narcissistic leaders often lack: humility, discernment, and courage.

- 1. Obedience to God's Will:** The donkey submitted to divine authority, even when it meant enduring hardship. In contrast, narcissistic leaders resist submission, prioritizing their desires and agendas over God's plans.
- 2. Courage in Correction:** The donkey confronted Balaam's reckless path, delivering a divine warning. Narcissistic leaders often reject correction, perceiving it as threatening their control.
- 3. Discernment Beyond Appearances:** The donkey recognized the presence of the angel of the Lord, displaying spiritual insight. Narcissistic leaders frequently lack such discernment, blinded by their focus on appearances and personal gain.

Suppose even a humble donkey can perceive and obey God's will. Why do some leaders entrusted with spiritual authority fail to do so? This question invites us to reflect on the traits of humility and obedience in leadership and their role in fulfilling God's purposes.

Lessons from Balaam's Donkey

As one can see, those very same characteristics exemplified by the donkey were character traits not demonstrated by Adam and Eve. Balaam's donkey engaged in delayed gratification and not being naïve to the dangers perceived on the road ahead. The donkey used discernment and was not susceptible to the deceptive nature of Balaam and did not move forward even when being beaten by him. Balaam's donkey was humble, trusting the guidance of the angel. The donkey was more fearful of not pleasing God than conforming to the dictatorial mandates of Balaam.

To address narcissistic tendencies in leadership, churches must embrace the qualities modeled by Balaam's donkey. These lessons are critical for fostering environments that reflect Christ's character and resist spiritual abuse:

1. Recognize the Risks of Spiritual Blindness:

Narcissistic leaders often ignore divine

warnings, endangering themselves and their congregations. Believers must seek God's guidance to discern truth from manipulation (Proverbs 3:5-6).

2. Embrace Humility in Leadership:

Like the donkey, effective leaders prioritize God's will over personal ambition. Philippians 2:3-4 exhorts leaders to act without selfish ambition, valuing others above themselves.

3. Value Unexpected Vessels:

Balaam's donkey, an unlikely messenger, carried a divine warning. Churches must remain open to correction and recognize that God often speaks through unexpected sources (1 Corinthians 1:27).

4. Hold Leaders Accountable:

Narcissistic leaders thrive in environments lacking accountability. Churches must establish structures that encourage transparency and ensure leadership aligns with biblical principles (Proverbs 11:14).

Discernment in Action: Listening Beyond the Words

Discernment is crucial in identifying and addressing narcissistic spiritual abuse. Watchman Nee's admonition, "Let us not be as mules without

understanding," challenges believers to evaluate the motives and intentions behind leaders' words. Does love motivate their actions for God or does self-promotion and control?

Narcissistic leaders often manipulate communication to maintain power, using charm or intimidation. Balaam's story warns against ignoring divine messages, no matter how unexpected their source. Proper discernment requires humility, spiritual maturity, character development, and a commitment to seeking God's wisdom over personal gain.

A Challenge to the Church

Balaam and his donkey's story challenge leaders and congregants to reflect on their responses to correction and humility. Have you dismissed voices or circumstances because they did not align with your expectations? Have you allowed a narcissistic leader to silence your discernment?

God's wisdom often comes through the unexpected. When the ass speaks, it is not the vessel but the message that matters. Narcissistic leaders usually fail to recognize this, allowing their pride to overshadow their spiritual responsibilities. For those under such leadership, it is vital to develop discernment, seeking God's guidance to distinguish truth from manipulation.

By embracing humility, fostering accountability,

and listening with discernment, the church can overcome the dangers of narcissistic leadership. This approach protects the integrity of ministry and ensures that God's voice remains central, guiding His people toward His purposes.

God uses the unexpected in every generation to challenge the prideful and uplift the humble. The question for the church today is simple yet profound: Will we listen when the ass speaks? By doing so, we align ourselves with God's will and open the door to His extraordinary work in our lives and communities.

The title "When the Ass Speaks, You Should Listen!" can provoke strong reactions, particularly from opinionated church leaders who may struggle with narcissistic tendencies. Their response to the title and its implications can inadvertently reveal traits of narcissistic leadership, such as defensiveness, dismissiveness, and an aversion to accountability. Granted, there can also be the fact that no one likes to be called a donkey's "ass" or a narcissistic A.S.S. (ambitious, selfish, sociopathic) leader; however, I use the term for the shock factor to bring attention to the toxic mindset and behaviors.

Opinionated leaders with narcissistic traits might immediately dismiss the title as disrespectful or irreverent without seeking to understand its deeper meaning. This reaction often stems from a

heightened sense of personal or institutional image, where anything perceived as a challenge to their authority or the church's decorum is rejected outright.

- ***Narcissistic Indicator:*** A tendency to prioritize appearances over substance, focusing on how the title reflects on them rather than exploring its message.

Such leaders may interpret the title as a personal affront, assuming it implies they are the "ass" in question. This defensive posture reveals an inflated sense of self-importance and a hypersensitivity to perceived criticism. Instead of seeing the title as an invitation to reflect on humility or the need for correction, they may view it as challenging their authority.

- ***Narcissistic Indicator:*** Viewing themselves as central to any critique or discussion, even when it is not directly aimed at them.

Opinionated leaders may attempt to reinterpret the title to fit their narrative, twisting its intent to align with their perspective. For instance, they might argue that the title is meant to challenge others to listen to their (the leader's) wisdom rather than exploring how it might encourage them to self-reflect.

- ***Narcissistic Indicator:*** A need to control the interpretation of ideas and deflect

potential accountability.

Rejecting the Message as Beneath Them

Such leaders might dismiss learning from unexpected sources—like the biblical example of Balaam's donkey—as irrelevant or unnecessary for someone in their position. This reaction reveals an unwillingness to acknowledge their capacity for error or to learn from those they deem less significant.

- ***Narcissistic Indicator:*** A lack of humility and openness to correction, coupled with a belief in their inherent superiority.

Instead of engaging with the book's substance, narcissistic leaders might critique the author's credentials, tone, or approach, seeking to discredit the message by undermining its source. This deflection strategy allows them to avoid introspection or discussion of their leadership practices.

- ***Narcissistic Indicator:*** Deflecting criticism by attacking the messenger rather than addressing the message.

Some leaders might choose the title's assertion to reinforce their authority, arguing that others should listen to them more carefully because they are uniquely anointed or wise. This behavior demonstrates their inclination to center discussions

on their own perceived importance.

- ***Narcissistic Indicator:*** Exploiting situations to reassert dominance and demand unquestioning loyalty.

The title's provocative nature is meant to spark reflection on humility, teachability, and the value of unexpected wisdom. However, narcissistic leaders often resist self-reflection, as it requires confronting personal flaws or weaknesses. Instead, they may deflect or minimize the need for introspection altogether.

- ***Narcissistic Indicator:*** Avoiding self-examination and accountability, preferring to focus on others' shortcomings.

Opinionated church leaders who demonstrate narcissistic tendencies may struggle to engage with "When the Ass Speaks, You Should Listen!" in a constructive way because they enjoy the co-dependent relationship dynamic they have with their congregation. Their reactions can reveal a resistance to humility, an aversion to accountability, and a need to maintain control or preserve their image. For such leaders, the book's message serves as both a mirror and a challenge—to embrace grace, authority, and purpose in ways that align with Christlike servanthood rather than self-centered leadership. It invites them to confront their blind spots and cultivate a heart open to learning, even from unexpected sources.

A Real-Life Example: The Unlikely Messenger in Modern Ministry

The biblical narrative of Balaam and his donkey offers timeless lessons on humility, discernment, and the power of unexpected vessels to deliver God’s message. Today, these lessons resonate deeply, particularly in ministries grappling with narcissistic spiritual abuse. A real-life example involves a young intern in a large, influential church who became the “unexpected messenger,” embodying the spirit of Balaam’s donkey in confronting toxic leadership.

The Context

The church was led by a charismatic pastor known for his dynamic preaching and strong vision. While the congregation admired his leadership, staff members quietly endured his anger, manipulation, and control. The pastor often dismissed feedback, silenced dissenting voices, and demanded unwavering loyalty, cultivating an environment of fear and mistrust. His behavior mirrored the traits of Narcissistic A.S.S. leadership: exploitation of authority, aversion to accountability, and rejection of correction.

The Unlikely Messenger

A young intern named Sarah joined the staff, eager to serve and grow in her faith. Over time, she noticed the toll the pastor's behavior took on staff morale and the church's unity. Unassuming and soft-spoken, Sarah found herself in a position no one else dared to occupy. One day, during a staff meeting, the pastor berated a team member for failing to meet his expectations. Amid the tension, Sarah respectfully spoke up:

“Pastor, I feel God is reminding us to lead with grace and humility, as Christ did. We're all here to serve Him, not just one vision or voice.”

The room fell silent. Although simple and spoken with genuine concern, Sarah's words carried the weight of truth. They exposed the pastor's behavior without directly accusing him, offering a divine nudge toward reflection and correction.

The Reaction

Instead of acknowledging Sarah's message, the pastor dismissed her comments as naïve, claiming she lacked the experience to understand the complexities of leadership. He shifted the blame to the staff, accusing them of disloyalty and misunderstanding his intentions. Despite this, Sarah's courage planted a seed of awareness among

the team, prompting quiet conversations about the church’s unhealthy dynamics.

The Impact

Though Sarah’s words did not immediately change the pastor’s behavior, they stirred a collective desire for transparency and accountability. Over time, several staff members began advocating for healthier leadership practices, inspired by her willingness to speak truth in love. Eventually, church elders intervened, addressing the pastor’s conduct and implementing structural changes to prioritize accountability and spiritual health.

Lessons from the Example

1. Unexpected Vessels Can Deliver Profound

Messages: Sarah, like Balaam’s donkey, was an unlikely messenger. Her humility and discernment catalyzed change, reminding the church that God often speaks through those who seem insignificant.

2. Resistance to Correction is a Hallmark of

Narcissistic Leadership: The pastor’s initial dismissal of Sarah’s words revealed his aversion to Accountability and his reliance on control. His reaction underscored the need for humility in leadership.

3. **Truth Spoken in Love Can Spark**

Transformation: Sarah’s courage and grace in addressing the issue created a ripple effect, empowering others to seek change and fostering a culture of reflection and growth.

4. **God’s Wisdom Often Confounds Human**

Expectations: Just as the donkey’s insight exceeded Balaam’s, Sarah’s words carried divine wisdom that challenged the pastor’s spiritual blindness and the congregation’s complicity.

The Karpman Drama Triangle provides a framework for understanding dysfunctional relational dynamics, particularly in environments shaped by narcissistic leadership, as Sarah, the pastor, and other church leaders demonstrated. It highlights three interconnected roles—**Victim**, **Persecutor**, and **Rescuer**—that individuals unconsciously adopt within toxic interactions. This example shows how the unexpected vessel does not fall victim to becoming the persecutor or rescuer but a supporter and healer.

In a later chapter, we will delve deeper into the **Karpman Drama Triangle**, exploring its relevance in ministry settings and its role in perpetuating narcissistic spiritual abuse. Through this lens, we can better understand how these dynamics unfold and how they can be disrupted to foster healing, accountability, and Christ-centered leadership.