

# Numbers 22:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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.

## Analysis

**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.** This verse presents one of Scripture's most theologically complex divine permissions—God allowing Balaam to proceed while simultaneously constraining his actions. The phrase "God came unto Balaam" (Elohim, not Yahweh) indicates genuine divine communication, yet the permission granted contains severe restrictions.

God's initial response to Balak's request was absolute prohibition: "Thou shalt not go with them; thou shalt not curse the people: for they are blessed" (22:12). However, after Balaam's persistence and Balak's increased offer, God permits the journey with the crucial limitation: "but yet the word which I shall say unto thee, that shalt thou do." This represents permissive will rather than directive will—God allowing human choice while maintaining sovereign control over outcomes. The Hebrew construction emphasizes the restrictive clause: *akh et-hadevar* ("only the word") establishes absolute boundaries on Balaam's prophetic utterances.

This passage reveals:

1. God's sovereignty over pagan prophets—even those outside the covenant can be instruments of His purposes

2. the danger of pursuing what God permits but doesn't approve—Balaam's journey led to judgment (22:22)
3. divine control of prophetic speech—no curse could prevail against God's blessed people;
4. the principle that God's permissive will may include testing our motives and allowing us to experience consequences of wrong desires.

## Historical Context

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This narrative occurs around 1405 BCE (early chronology) or 1230 BCE (late chronology) as Israel camped in the plains of Moab, preparing to enter Canaan. Balaam ben Beor was a renowned Mesopotamian diviner from Pethor near the Euphrates River (Numbers 22:5), approximately 400 miles from Moab. His international reputation as a prophet whose blessings and curses were efficacious explains why Balak, king of Moab, would send such a distant summons.

Archaeological evidence illuminates Balaam's historical context. The 1967 discovery of the Deir 'Alla inscription in Jordan's Jordan Valley (8th century BCE) mentions "Balaam son of Beor, the man who was a seer of the gods," confirming his lasting reputation in Transjordan traditions. Ancient Near Eastern divination practices included examining animal livers, observing omens, and receiving divine dreams—practices Balaam would have employed.

Balak's fear of Israel stemmed from recent Israelite victories over Sihon and Og (Numbers 21:21-35), demonstrating Israel's military superiority. Moab, descended from Lot (Genesis 19:37), shared ethnic connections with Israel but remained outside the covenant. The historical setting reveals international politics, religious syncretism, and the widespread belief in prophetic power. Balaam's story demonstrates that even pagan religious practitioners recognized Yahweh's supreme authority, though Balaam's later counsel led Israel into sin (Numbers 31:16; Revelation 2:14).

## Related Passages

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**James 2:17** — Faith and works

## Study Questions

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1. What is the difference between God's permissive will and His directive will, and how can we discern whether He is approving or merely allowing our choices?
2. Why might God permit us to pursue paths He doesn't fully approve, and what does Balaam's example teach about the consequences of such pursuits?
3. How does God's absolute control over Balaam's prophetic words demonstrate His sovereignty to protect His people even through unwilling or compromised instruments?
4. What warning does Balaam's story provide about mixing spiritual gifting with mercenary motives or serving God while pursuing worldly gain?
5. In what areas of life might we be persisting in requests to God that He has already answered negatively, and how should Balaam's experience shape our prayers?

## Interlinear Text

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לְקֹרֵא אָמַם לֹא יָמַן בְּלִיעָם לִילָה אָמַר וְאַתָּה בָּאָתָה  
came And God H413 unto Balaam H1109 at night H3915 and said H559 H0 H518 to call H7121

אַתָּה בְּאַתָּה אַתָּה בְּאַתָּה אַתָּה בְּאַתָּה  
H0 came H376 thee rise up H6965 with them but yet H389 H853

תַּעֲשֶׂה: אַתָּה אַל יַבְדֵּל אַתָּה אַל יַבְדֵּל אַתָּה אַל יַבְדֵּל  
the word H834 which I shall say H1696 unto thee that shalt thou do H6213 H413 H853

## Additional Cross-References

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**Numbers 23:26** (Parallel theme): But Balaam answered and said unto Balak, Told not I thee, saying, All that the LORD speaketh, that I must do?

**Numbers 23:12** (Parallel theme): And he answered and said, Must I not take heed to speak that which the LORD hath put in my mouth?

**Numbers 24:13** (Word): 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?

**Numbers 22:35** (Word): And the angel of the LORD said unto Balaam, Go with the men: but only the word that I shall speak unto thee, that thou shalt speak. So Balaam went with the princes of Balak.

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