

# 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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לָקָרָא	אֵם	ל	וִי	אָמַר	לַיְלָה	בְּלַעַם	אֶל	אֱלֹהֵי יִם	בָּאוּ
to call	H518	H0	and said	H559	at night	H3915	unto Balaam	H413	And God
H7121							H1109		H935
אֶת	וְאֵלֵיהֶם	אֵת	לֵךְ	קוּמוּ	הָאֲנָשִׁים יִם	בָּאוּ	לָב		
H853	with them but yet	H854	H1980	thee rise up	H376	came	H0		
	H389			H6965		H935			
תַּעֲשֶׂה:	אֵת	וְאֵלֵי יְיָ	אֲדַבֵּר	אֲשֶׁר	הַדָּבָר				
unto thee that shalt thou do	H853	H413	which I shall say	H834	the word				
H6213			H1696		H1697				

## 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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