



A Divided Heart

What happens when God gives you permission to do something He already told you not to do.

NUMBERS 22:22 (LSB) · A STUDY ON DIVIDED OBEDIENCE AND THE HEART BEHIND OUR CHOICES

“But God was angry because he was going, so the angel of Yahweh took his stand in the way as an adversary against him. Now he was riding on his donkey, and his two young men were with him.”

NUMBERS 22:22, LSB

I have to be upfront with you about this one. This is the lesson that ended up preaching to me. While I was studying it, it walked right into my own life and put its finger on something I had been doing for years, and I wrote about that in a blog called Turning the Donkey Around on our website. So I am not teaching Balaam from a safe distance. I am teaching him as somebody who recognized himself in the story.

What the passage says

Israel is camped on the plains of Moab at the end of forty years in the wilderness, one river away from the land God promised them. A king named Balak watches them from his side of the border and decides he cannot fight them. So he sends a long way off for a man named Balaam and offers to pay him to curse them.

God’s answer to Balaam is immediate and complete: “Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed” (22:12). Three things in one sentence. Do not go. Do not curse. And the reason underneath both, they are blessed.

Then something strange happens. Balak sends a second, richer offer. Balaam asks God again. And this time God says go. Then verse 22 tells us God was angry that he went.

That is the tension every honest reader hits. God said go, and God was angry that he went. The passage is not confused, and it is not hiding the answer. It is telling us that the problem was never in the instructions. The problem was in the man carrying them.

Before we get to that, it is worth knowing exactly who these two men were and what was actually being bought.

Why Balak sent for Balaam

What he saw. Numbers 22:2 gives the trigger: “Now Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites.” To feel the weight of that, back up one chapter.

In Numbers 21, Israel asked Sihon king of the Amorites for permission to pass through on the King’s Highway. He refused, gathered his army, and met Israel at Jahaz. Israel struck him with the edge of the sword and took his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok. Then Og king of Bashan came out against them at Edrei with all his people, and Israel left him no survivor.

Now the detail that turns Balak’s stomach. Numbers 21:26 tells us Heshbon was Sihon’s city because Sihon had fought against the former king of Moab and taken all his land as far as the Arnon. Moab had already fought that war and lost it. Sihon beat Moab. Israel erased Sihon. Balak is doing the math on a people who destroyed the man Moab could not handle.

What else he saw. Verse 3 adds the second thing: “So Moab was in great fear because of the people, for they were numerous; and Moab was in dread of the sons of Israel.” This is the nation that came out of Egypt. Numbers 1 counts 603,550 men of fighting age, not including the Levites, the women, or the children. Whatever number you land on for the whole camp, what Balak sees from his ridge is a nation-sized encampment pressed against his border that has just gone undefeated twice.

Verse 4 is how he describes it to the elders of Midian: this horde will lick up everything around us the way an ox licks up the grass of the field. Total consumption. No malice required, just appetite.

Two things worth saying plainly here. First, Balak’s fear was real but his conclusion was wrong. Deuteronomy 2:9 records God’s explicit order to Israel: do not harass Moab or provoke them to war, because that land belongs to the sons of Lot. Israel was never coming for him. Balak panicked over a threat that did not exist, and that panic is what drove him to hire a curse, which is what eventually destroyed his people at Peor. Fear that will not check its facts against God is expensive.

Second, notice who is in the room in verse 4. The elders of Midian. Midian is in this from the opening paragraph, and Midian is where chapters 25 and 31 end up. The alliance formed here in fear is the same one Balaam later exploits.

What Balak actually wanted. He says it himself, and everything depends on the order of it: “Now, please come, curse this people for me since they are too mighty for me; perhaps I may be able to strike them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed” (22:6).

Curse first, then fight. Balak is not hiring Balaam instead of an army. He is hiring him to soften the target so the army can finish it. In the ancient Near East a pronounced curse was not an insult or a wish, it was believed to actually do something to the thing it was aimed at. Balak is buying a weapon.

Who Balaam was. He does not shop locally. He sends to Pethor, near the River, which Deuteronomy 23:4 places in Mesopotamia. That is hundreds of miles and a round trip of weeks. He passed over every diviner in Moab for this specific man.

As for the work itself, the text is blunt. The delegation leaves carrying “the fees for divination” (22:7). The Hebrew is *qesamim*, from the root *qesem*, the same practice Deuteronomy 18:10 forbids Israel outright. Joshua 13:22 names him without softening it: Balaam son of Beor, the diviner. Not the prophet.

His method shows up later in the story. Seven altars, a bull and a ram on each, three separate times at three separate lookouts (23:1, 23:14, 23:29), with Balak physically relocating him when a site fails to produce. And Numbers 24:1 says that this time “he did not go as at other times to seek omens,” which tells us omen-seeking was his standard procedure. A paid professional, with a technique and a price, imported to do a job.

Why the plan was dead before the messengers left. Genesis 12:3, God to Abram: “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse.” Balak reached for the one weapon God had personally promised to turn back on whoever used it. Deuteronomy 23:5 says that is exactly what happened.

A note from outside the Bible. In 1967, at Deir ‘Alla in Jordan, archaeologists found plaster fragments of an inscription referring to “Balaam son of Beor, a seer of the gods.” It is not a copy of Numbers and it does not confirm the events of chapter 22. What it does show is that a figure by that name, in that role, was known in that region. Worth having in your pocket, not worth overselling.

Why this is hard

We tend to measure obedience by behavior. Did I do the thing or not? Scripture keeps insisting on a harder measure, which is what was happening in the heart while the behavior was happening.

Balaam never technically disobeys in this chapter. He does not go until he is told to go. He tells Balak’s men that not even a house full of silver and gold could make him cross the word of Yahweh (22:18), which is one of the most spiritual-sounding lines in the book. On paper, he is clean.

But look at what he says to Balak’s men the first time. God had given him three things. Balaam passes along one of them, and he rewords it: “Yahweh has refused to allow me to go with you” (22:13). He says nothing about the curse. He says nothing about Israel being blessed. He turns a moral answer into a permit problem.

That matters, because permit problems can be appealed. Moral answers cannot.

Asking twice

The whole lesson turns on one verse. When the second delegation arrives with a better offer, Balaam tells them:

“So now, please, you also stay here tonight, and I will know what else Yahweh will speak to me.”

NUMBERS 22:19, LSB

What else.

God had not been unclear. Balaam is not seeking clarity here, he is seeking a revision. Nobody re-asks a settled question unless they are hoping for a different answer, and I know that because I have re-asked plenty of settled questions myself.

And God gives him one. That is the part that unsettles people, and it should. God tells him to go, and then stands in the road with a drawn sword because he went. The best sense of the text is that God gave Balaam over to the thing Balaam had already chosen. The instruction changed. The heart never did.

Scripture has a category for this. In Psalm 106 God gives Israel exactly what they demanded and sends wasting along with it. The request was granted, and the granting was the judgment.

So here is the plain takeaway, and it is one of the most practical things in the chapter: an open door is not proof of God's approval. Sometimes the open door is the exposure of your heart. If you keep asking until you get a yes, you have not received guidance. You have received permission to prove what you already wanted.

What the donkey saw

Read what happens next and notice that the story is written with a straight face but the point is unmistakable.

Balaam is a seer. He later describes himself as the man whose eye is opened, who sees the vision of the Almighty (24:4). And in this chapter there is a drawn sword standing in the road, and he walks toward it three times without seeing a thing. The donkey sees it every time.

Three times the animal turns aside. Three times Balaam beats it for the three times it saved his life. He tells the donkey that if he had a sword in his hand he would kill it (22:29), while a sword is drawn and aimed at him. Then God does something no prophet could have arranged: He bypasses the professional speaker and puts the message in an animal's mouth.

Sit with the fourth detail, because it is the one that will follow you home. The obstruction was the mercy. The angel says it outright: if the donkey had not turned aside, "I would surely have killed you just now, and let it live" (22:33). The thing in his way was the only thing keeping him alive, and he was furious at it.

Then comes Balaam's response, and it is worth reading twice.

"I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the way against me. So now, if it is evil in your sight, I will turn back."

NUMBERS 22:34, LSB

He confesses ignorance rather than rebellion. He makes his repentance conditional on God's opinion, as though it were still an open question. And he hands the decision back instead of turning around. A man

who is genuinely finished turns the donkey around and goes home.

A note worth being careful about: the text calls this figure the angel, or messenger, of Yahweh. He speaks in the first person as the one who has been offended, and Balaam bows to the ground before him. Many faithful teachers across church history have read this as an appearance of Christ before His incarnation, and the evidence for that reading is real. Others read him as a created messenger carrying delegated authority and speaking Yahweh's words. Numbers 22 does not settle the question, and the lesson stands either way.

How it ended

This is the part most people never get to, and it is the whole point.

Balaam never curses Israel. Not once. Three oracles in chapters 23 and 24, and every one of them comes out a blessing. Deuteronomy 23:5 says God turned the curse into a blessing. Micah 6:5 tells Israel to remember it. By any external measure, Balaam obeyed.

And he still got his money.

Turn to Numbers 25. Israel falls into immorality with the women of Moab, joins itself to Baal of Peor, and twenty-four thousand people die. Nothing in the chapter connects that to Balaam. Then Numbers 31:16 says it out loud: it was the counsel of Balaam that caused Israel to trespass at Peor. Revelation 2:14 removes any doubt, naming him as the one who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel.

He could not curse them, so he taught Balak how to get Israel to curse themselves. He kept the letter perfectly and sold the strategy.

Numbers 31:8 records how it ends for him. Balaam dies by the sword among the Midianites, the same allies who were sitting in the room back in 22:4. The sword he was too blind to see in chapter 22 finds him anyway.

Living it out

The danger this passage names is not open rebellion. Open rebellion is easy to spot and easy to repent of. The danger here is the divided heart that keeps its paperwork clean.

It shows up in small, familiar ways, and I can name them because I have done them. Rephrasing the question until the answer changes. Asking three more people after the first one told you the truth. Calling something a gray area when the only gray in it is the part you added. Waiting for a door to open and treating the open door as the blessing. Getting angry at the person or the circumstance that keeps blocking you, without once asking why it will not move.

Bringing this under Christ starts with being honest about what has already been settled. Some questions in your life are closed. You do not need more information about them. You need to stop asking.

A deeper study: the Balaam thread through Scripture

Balaam shows up far more often than most readers realize, and following the thread is a study in itself. Here is a starting path:

- **Numbers 21:21-35:** Sihon and Og, the two victories that put Moab in a panic.
- **Numbers 22-24:** the full narrative, the three oracles, and the blessings Balaam could not withhold.
- **Numbers 25:1-3:** Peor, and the sin that looks unconnected until Scripture connects it.
- **Numbers 31:8, 16:** his death, and the verse that names him as the architect of Peor.
- **Deuteronomy 2:9:** God had already forbidden Israel to touch Moab. Balak's fear was unfounded.
- **Deuteronomy 18:10-12:** divination named and forbidden, the trade Balaam worked in.
- **Deuteronomy 23:4-5:** Pethor of Mesopotamia, and God turning the intended curse into a blessing.
- **Joshua 13:22:** Balaam is called the diviner, not the prophet.
- **Joshua 24:9-10 and Nehemiah 13:2:** Israel is told to remember what God did with Balaam.
- **Micah 6:5:** remember what Balak counseled and what Balaam answered, as evidence of God's righteousness.
- **Genesis 12:3:** the promise that made the whole scheme impossible before it started.
- **2 Peter 2:15-16:** the way of Balaam, which is loving the wages of unrighteousness.
- **Jude 11:** the error of Balaam, tied to greed.
- **Revelation 2:14:** the teaching of Balaam, the stumbling block at Peor.
- **Psalms 106:15:** God grants a request as an act of judgment.
- **Genesis 3:1:** "Indeed, has God said?" The oldest tactic is not denying God's word but reopening it.

Your challenge this week

A divided heart is not exposed in a class; it is exposed in the moments no one sees. Pick up the work with a few concrete steps:

Name the settled question. Write down one thing you know God has already answered that you keep bringing back to Him in different words. Not a hard decision you are still praying about. A closed one you keep reopening. Naming it is most of the work.

Read the whole story. Take Numbers 21 through 25 in one sitting this week, then read Numbers 31:16 and Revelation 2:14 immediately after. Watching the connection land is worth more than any explanation of it.

Identify your donkey. Ask God to show you the obstruction you have been resenting. It may be a delay, a closed door, a person who keeps telling you something you do not want to hear. Ask whether it is in your way or standing between you and something you cannot see.

Check the loophole. Where are you keeping the letter of something while working an angle to get the thing anyway? This is the hardest question in the lesson, because Balaam never broke a rule.

Say it to somebody. Tell one person you trust what you wrote down in the first step, and give them permission to ask you about it. A divided heart survives on privacy.

Work through the deeper study list above at your own pace, one passage at a time. The goal is not a cleaner record. It is a heart that stops negotiating.

The Gospel underneath it

Balaam gave God flawless external compliance and died on the wrong side of a sword. That should be terrifying to anyone who has been measuring themselves by behavior, because it means our record can look clean while our heart is somewhere else entirely.

That is exactly why the Gospel is not a program of improvement. God said through Ezekiel that He would remove the heart of stone and give a heart of flesh, and He did it through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ obeyed His Father with an undivided heart, all the way to a cross, and that obedience is credited to everyone who trusts Him.

So the answer to the man who asked twice is not to try harder to ask once. It is to receive a new heart from the only One who ever had a whole one, and then to walk with Him closely enough that His answer is enough the first time. That is what turning the donkey around finally looks like.