

Along with this important fact we must always remember that the Bible is written in human language, and human language is a very weak instrument for accurately presenting ideas. Every human language has many ambiguities. Almost every syntactical form can be interpreted in various ways.

We can easily forget that the imperative form of the verb always expresses a command. Although this is its commonest use, it can also be used to express a permission. I think of two very clear examples in Scripture.

The first of these is found in Numbers 22. Balak has sent emissaries to ask Balaam to come to him and curse Israel (verses 2-7). Balaam asks the LORD what he should do (verses 8-10). God says: "Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed" (verse 12). Balak sends a second expedition to urge him to come and promise rich rewards for cursing Israel (verses 15-17). Balaam tells the messengers that he cannot do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the LORD, but says he will ask the LORD again (verses 18-19). Now God says: "... go with them, but do only what I tell you" (verse 20). It is clear that God did not reverse Himself and give Balaam a command to go. He simply granted Balaam's request.

If someone were to question this interpretation and say that the word "go" in verse 20 was really a command, not simply a permission, he would find himself in difficulty in reading in verse 22 that "God was very angry when he went." God gave Balaam permission to go; He did not order him to go. God gave Balaam the permission he asked, and turned a catastrophe into a blessing for God's people, but Balaam himself gained nothing from what he did.

Another clear illustration of this use of the imperative is found in 2 Kings 2. Here verses 11-12 tell how "Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind.... And Elisha saw him no more." A little later Elisha met the company of the prophets from Jericho and they said to him: "We ... have fifty able men. Let them go and look for your master. Perhaps the Spirit of the LORD has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley." The end of verse 16 is very clear: "No," Elisha replied, "do not send them." Verse 17 says: "But they persisted until he was too ashamed to refuse. So he said, "Send them."