

Numbers

Objectives of this lesson

1. Articulate the unique canonical contribution of the book of Numbers.
2. Explain the difference between the postponement and cancellation of the promises
3. Explain the relationship between the first 10 chapters and the rest of the book
4. Trace the intertextual themes of the curses of Balaam to their sources

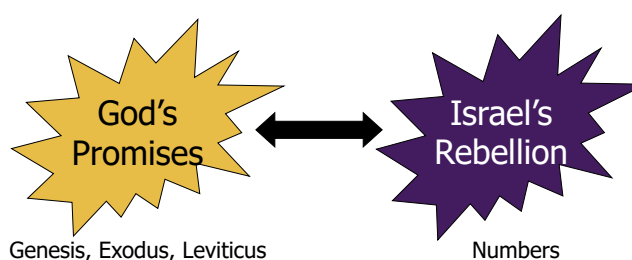
Some key terms

God's sovereignty, human responsibility, Sinai, Moab, Kadesh-barnea, Balak, Balaam, dust of Jacob, conditional love

Introduction to Numbers

Canonical Contribution

The phrase “canonical contribution” refers to the unique teaching that each book brings to the canon or entire body of scripture. No two books say the same thing, or one would be unnecessary. The unique theological contribution that Numbers brings is a discussion of the relationship between the love and sovereignty of God and the responsibility of his people.



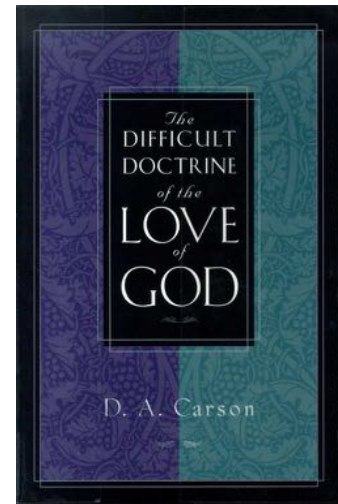
Up to this point in the story of the Pentateuch we have focused upon the sovereignty of God and the powerful fulfillment of his promises. He made the promises in Genesis and then fulfilled the major part of the nation promise in Exodus. After he won his bride from Egypt, he gave directions for fellowship in Leviticus and it appears that this program has developed a lot of speed and momentum that should carry them quickly into the Promised Land. Wrong!

Instead they take a 40-year death march in the desert! That expectation, however, would be wrong, because Numbers introduces the reader to a new subject, namely, how the choices of Israel affect the plan of God for them and we find a serious postponement of the promises while the nation languishes in the desert for



forty years as a result of her sin. At least God's promise to bring Israel into the land of Promise is postponed, rather than being cancelled!

A couple of years ago I read a short book with a curious title, *The difficult doctrine of the love of God*. Don Carson, a leading theologian of our time, wrote the book and addressed the title in his introduction by saying that the reader is probably surprised by the phrase *love of God* and might have expected something such as *hell* or *election* to follow the words, *The difficult doctrine of . . .*. This is because we've all assumed that the love of God is nothing more than the simple unconditional love of which we love to speak and praise God for in our worship songs. The truth, however, according to Carson is that the love of God is much more complex and that the Bible clearly teaches a *conditional love* of God as well. You can slice it and define it various ways, but the sum of the biblical data is clear that we can take ourselves out of the place where God can righteously express his love toward us. As Jesus' little brother, Jude warns us in his book, verse 22 "keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life." The book of Numbers discusses what happens when the nation deliberately disobeys and puts themselves outside of God's love and what this means for the fulfillment of the promises.



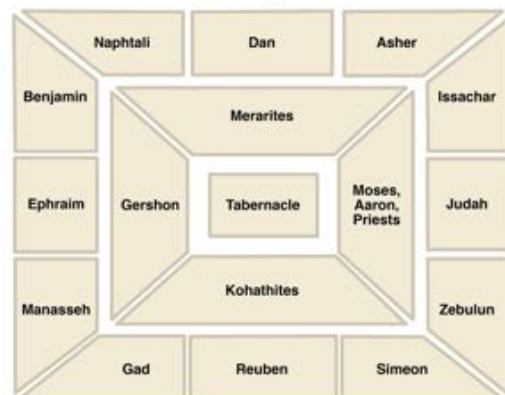
Date

Because the book spans the time of the wilderness wanderings and ends with the nation in the Transjordan area awaiting entrance into the land, the date of the events and also the writing was probably around 1406 BC.

Numbers 1–10: The background: God arranges Israel's camp as they prepare to leave

In a book, which so clearly focuses upon the human responsibility, this section provides a stunning backdrop. For ten chapters, God orders and arranges all of Israel's collective life with commands for arrangement and purity in the camp without a break in the narrative. The only unusual feature of this section is the way Moses peppers the account with numerous repetitions of exacting obedience to the commands. The picture of this section is of an obedient people at peace with their God, poised to inherit His promises. Because of this Israel's failure and God's judgment in chapters ten through twenty-one stands out in bold relief.

A good example of the kind of commands that God gives are found in chapter 2. God gives very simple orders to physically organize the tribes as they camp and as they travel with a result that appears like this illustration. As you can see this is a necessary step to avoid confusion and provide order, but it isn't a particularly difficult goal to achieve! The comment that Moses simply must write down, however is this:



*Numbers 2:34 So the Israelites **did everything the Lord commanded Moses**; that is the way they encamped under their standards, and that is the way they set out, each with his clan and family.*

This is why it is a good example of the kinds of commands that God provides in chapters 1-10—what God asks is not difficult, but what is emphasized is simply that the people completely obey, and this makes for a very happy relationship!

Here is a sampling of the “peppering” or repetition of Moses’ comments about obedience in 1—10.

*Numbers 1:19 . . . **as the Lord commanded Moses**. And so he counted them in the Desert of Sinai:*

*Numbers 1:54 The Israelites did all this **just as the Lord commanded Moses**.*

*Numbers 2:34 So the Israelites **did everything the Lord commanded Moses**; that is the way they encamped under their standards, and that is the way they set out, each with his clan and family.*

*Numbers 3:51 Moses gave the redemption money to Aaron and his sons, **as he was commanded** by the word of the Lord.*

*Numbers 4:49 **At the Lord’s command through Moses**, each was assigned his work and told what to carry. Thus they were counted, as the Lord commanded Moses.*

*Numbers 5:4 The Israelites did this; they sent them outside the camp. They did **just as the Lord had instructed Moses**.*

Numbers 7:89 When Moses entered the Tent of Meeting to speak with the Lord, he heard the voice speaking to him from between the two cherubim above the atonement cover on the ark of the Testimony. And he spoke with him.

*Numbers 8:4 This is how the lampstand was made: It was made of hammered gold—from its base to its blossoms. The lampstand was made **exactly like the pattern the Lord had shown Moses**.*

*Numbers 8:20 Moses, Aaron and the whole Israelite community did with the Levites **just as the Lord commanded Moses.***

*Numbers 9:5 and they did so in the Desert of Sinai at twilight on the fourteenth day of the first month. **The Israelites did everything just as the Lord commanded Moses.***

*Numbers 9:23 At the Lord's command they encamped, and at the Lord's command they set out. They obeyed the Lord's order, **in accordance with his command through Moses.***

As you move through the chapters you can't miss the emphasis, especially when you read chapters 11—20 and suddenly realize that all those comments have disappeared! You can see the obedience in all the examples except for one in the middle, i.e., Numbers 7:89. I've included this verse simply because of the profoundly good relationship it communicates. In the middle of all the obedience Moses shows us one of its results, namely, an astoundingly intimate and daily dialogue with God! "Between the cherubim" is a reference to the two figures who "sat" atop the Ark of the Covenant and God's presence was manifest between them as he "sat" on his throne (the ark).



Imagine what it would be like today if God's people erected a tent where God himself lived and your pastor was allowed to enter and talk with God face to face on a daily basis: Would you want to hear what he had to say? Talk about name dropping . . . "Yes, this morning I was talking to God and he said this to me." And when you had any kind of question you could ask your Pastor to ask God next time he saw him! This would be a wonderful relationship to have and so far in the book it is happening on a daily basis when Israel is simply obeying God.

Numbers 10–14: Israel takes a step back

These chapters portray a huge turning point in the story—the march toward the fulfillment of the promises suddenly takes a horrible detour. It doesn't all happen at once, however. The turn starts very slowly, almost imperceptibly, but then once it picks up momentum there is no turning back.

1) Moses' lack of faith in God's direction (?), 10

The first movement away from God *may* be Moses' responsibility. I'm not certain about this interpretation so I'll let you decide. The curious part of the story is Moses' request of his brother-in-law Hobab to guide the nation through the wilderness (10:29–31):

²⁹Now Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, "We are setting out for the place about which the LORD said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will treat you well, for the LORD has promised good things to Israel."

³⁰He answered, "No, I will not go; I am going back to my own land and my own people."

³¹But Moses said, “Please do not leave us. You know where we should camp in the wilderness, and you can be our eyes.”

While this request may seem innocent, I still wonder why Moses needed Hobab to guide them. Hadn't God promised somewhere to guide Israel? As a matter of fact, he just did in the previous chapter. Take a look at the text in 9:15-23:

15 On the day the tabernacle, the tent of the covenant law, was set up, the cloud covered it. From evening till morning the cloud above the tabernacle looked like fire. 16 That is how it continued to be; the cloud covered it, and at night it looked like fire. 17 Whenever the cloud lifted from above the tent, the Israelites set out; wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped. 18 At the LORD's command the Israelites set out, and at his command they encamped. As long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they remained in camp. 19 When the cloud remained over the tabernacle a long time, the Israelites obeyed the LORD's order and did not set out. 20 Sometimes the cloud was over the tabernacle only a few days; at the LORD's command they would encamp, and then at his command they would set out. 21 Sometimes the cloud stayed only from evening till morning, and when it lifted in the morning, they set out. Whether by day or by night, whenever the cloud lifted, they set out. 22 Whether the cloud stayed over the tabernacle for two days or a month or a year, the Israelites would remain in camp and not set out; but when it lifted, they would set out. 23 At the LORD's command they encamped, and at the LORD's command they set out. They obeyed the LORD's order, in accordance with his command through Moses.

Reading this over is repetitious, to make the point that God will lead the people, and it appears to set us up to question Moses' actions when he asks Hobab to do the same. If we have God, why do we need Hobab? This is clearly not a blatant sin with immediate consequences, but I wonder if it isn't a *small and first step in the wrong direction*?

2) The people's complaint on the outskirts, 11:1-3

1 Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. 2 When the people cried out to Moses, he prayed to the Lord and the fire died down. 3 So that place was called Taberah, because fire from the Lord had burned among them.

If God's reaction to the people seems harsh it may be because we don't understand 1) the whole situation and 2) what a serious sin complaining really is. Complaining shows a serious distrust in God's goodness and sovereignty so God takes it very seriously (Phil 2:5–14). Also note that this complaining evidently happens just on the outskirts of the camp.

3) The people's complaint about food, 11:4-10

Now the point of complaining is specified, and it clearly involves food. The people are tired of the “what is it?” and now *everyone* chimes in (11:10):

Moses heard the people of every family wailing at the entrance to their tents. The LORD became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled.

4) Miriam & Aaron's complaint against Moses, 12

In chapter 12 both Miriam and Aaron complain against Moses because of his wife and the bottom line is again a burning anger from the Lord (10:9). The geographical and essential movement of the complaints now lands at the doorstep of Moses, himself and it comes through his own “leadership team.”

5) The nation's rebellion against God's direction to enter the land, 13-14

This final step backward involves the entire nation at a place just on the southern border of the promised land called Kadesh-barnea. It is the famous story of ten spies versus the two spies and, of course, the ten win the day with their scary stories of the “Anakites” who inhabit the land (13:31–33):



³¹But the men who had gone up with him said, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.” ³²And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, “The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. ³³We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.”

I really wonder if any of the spies actually asked the Anakites if they thought the Israelites looked like grasshoppers or if they just threw this “insight” in for good measure to bolster their case! In any event the negative report won the day and God’s judgment was simply that all those who had consciously participated (i.e., those over twenty years old) in the vote of “no

confidence” in God were not worthy to enter the land and would die off in the desert over the next forty years (14:29-35):

²⁹ In this wilderness your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. ³⁰ Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. ³¹ As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected. ³² But as for you, your bodies will fall in this wilderness. ³³ Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the wilderness. ³⁴ For forty years—one year for each of the forty days you explored the land—you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you. ³⁵ I, the Lord, have spoken, and I will surely do these things to this whole wicked community, which has banded together against me. They will meet their end in this wilderness; here they will die.”

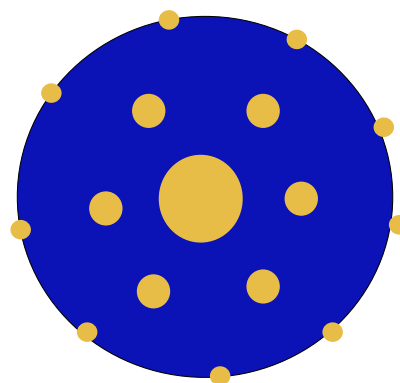
If the account of God’s rejection of that generation seems harsh I think we need to see it in the context of the whole movement from chapter 10—14. Israel didn’t just wake up one day and make a horribly, wrong decision that cost them forty years in the desert. No, this bad decision had been preceded by several smaller, but equally poor decisions that, over time, built up and hardened their hearts, so that when it came time to make a really important decision (that would have very lasting consequences) they were totally unprepared to make a wise choice. They were so practiced in folly that wisdom didn’t appear as an option. Just notice the geographical progression!

II:I-3 Outskirts

II:10 Every tent

12 Leadership

13-14 Whole nation



Numbers 22—24: God again takes a step forward

At this point in the story we’ve zoomed through 40 years in the wilderness of Sinai—the old generation has died off and a new generation has taken charge! Remember that this new generation had spent the vast majority of their lives wandering in this wilderness region. Although they did enjoy the daily miracle of God’s provision in manna, even miracles that happen on a daily basis begin to lose their wonder. By the end of the monotony and seeming purposelessness of these 40 years I’m sure that everyone wondered if God would remember them. “Surely even God



has his limits on his patience, right? It would be fair if he simply abandoned us. Will he remember?" It is these questions that the story of Balaam answers.

The story of Balaam

As God directs the nation toward the entrance to the land, he leads them through the land of Moab so that they will enter the land of Israel from the east through the Jordan River. The Moabite king, Balak, fears that Israel will overwhelm his small country, so he calls for supernatural help. In today's terminology we could say that Balak doesn't have the conventional military strength to repel Israel so he calls on someone who can provide the trump card of *nuclear* power. Remember that just because the help is supernatural doesn't mean that it's good! In fact, it's not! Balak, the king of Moab, calls upon Balaam, who has a reputation for calling down curses on people's enemies with amazing effectiveness. In essence he is the 15th century BC equivalent of a hired gun, or better yet, a hired sorcerer because he deals in other-worldly power. Balak's confidence in Balaam is stated in 22:6 when he says:



"For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed."

Immediately the thoughtful reader should be reminded of another Person who has promised the same thing. That promise by Yahweh is found in Genesis 12. We've summarized it as land, nation and leader, but we could just as easily summarize it by "bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you":

1 *"I will give you the land ..."*
 2 *"I will make you into a great nation"*
 3 *I will bless those who bless you,
 and whoever curses you I will curse;
 and all peoples on earth
 will be blessed through you."*



So immediately we have a contrast and contest between these two powerful entities whose word reputedly effectively blesses or curses whomever they wish. Now in hindsight a mere human prophet would be no match for the creator God, but in this situation, I think there were probably doubts about Yahweh's willingness to remember his promises and Balaam did indeed have a reputation for his ability to wield supernatural power, whatever the source! All of Israel knew that God had the *ability* to overpower others, the question was, given Israel's long rebellion, whether he still had the *desire* to do so.

Just before we look at the story itself, we need to talk about Balaam the prophet. Since he's called a prophet, speaks with Yahweh, and seems to obey him it's hard for some people to think of him as a bad guy. But if we read the whole story of Numbers and the New Testament's evaluation of him, we find out that Balaam is a polytheistic sorcerer, false-prophet kind of person (2 Pet 2)! What is actually happening in this chapter is that he *appears* to obey Yahweh but only because it suits his own ends. When he finds out that traveling with Balak will be a very profitable gig he asks God again and God reluctantly allows it, not because Balak is asking with proper motives but because God will use his sinfulness to make an important point. He thinks he is "playing" God, but God is actually using his willfulness to make a point. More about this later.

On the way to the camp of Israel, Balaam is stopped in his tracks three times by his talking donkey. With apologies to *Shrek* and contrary to donkey's opinion, donkeys are not revered as "the wisest of all creatures," but rather the most stubborn and perhaps irrational. This is why the idea of a donkey being able to talk sense to the prophet is a humorous and predictive turn of events. We say predictive because what is about to happen is that Balaam will attempt to say one thing, but out of his mouth will come another and the careful reader will understand why. If God is able to make a dumb animal speak, then he can and does do the same for the prophet. Although Balaam is known for his wonderful and effective speech, it is the God of Abraham who puts effective words first in the mouth of the donkey and then in the mouth of the prophet. In summary this little story, before the story, about the donkey is a preview so that when the real story comes we'll already be clued in to what is really happening. "So, Balaam, you're a really powerful speaker? If this is a contest of who is the more powerful speaker, then you don't stand a chance!"



"Curse" #1

We're ready now to look at the first of four "curses" by Balaam on Israel. (I put the word *curse* in quotation marks to indicate that although they are intended as curses, they actually have the opposite effect!) When he comes upon them, he is physically overlooking them down in the valley below. Thus, his word in 23:9-10, "From the rocky peaks I see them, from the heights I view them." It was probably a scene like this one.



When he then says, "I see people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations (23:9)," he is making an allusion to God's promise in Exodus 19 when God constituted them into a very special nation that indeed is NOT just another one of the nations (Exodus 19:5-6):

“And now, if you will diligently obey me and keep my covenant, then you will be my special possession out of all the nations, for all the earth is mine. And you will be my kingdom of priests and a holy nation””

When God promised to make them a special nation (in Exodus) by making them a kingdom of priests it was a fulfillment of Genesis 12:2: “I will make you into a great nation.” Indeed, God is working out his special promises to this nation and if he keeps Genesis 12:2, will he not keep the promise about taking them into the land as Genesis 12:1 promises as well?

When Balaam continues (29:10):

“Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel,”

Where he alludes to the wonderful Abrahamic promises as stated when God reiterated them to Jacob in Genesis 28:13–14.

He said, “I am the Lord, the God of your grandfather Abraham and the God of your father Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the ground you are lying on. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west, east, north, and south.

Finally, Balaam says “Let me die the death of the righteous and my end be like theirs.” This is a typical middle eastern way to bless a person and acknowledge that they will have a full and long life!

Now, if you’re tempted to think that Balaam has turned into a good guy at this point, just look at his explanation. When Balak complains that this word of cursing sounds more like a blessing he responds that Yahweh placed the words in his mouth! He intended to curse, but God made him bless by making (as he had done with the donkey) words come out of his mouth that the prophet hadn’t voluntarily offered. This is why we put quotations around the word “Curse” in the heading above. Balak then responds, “Alright, whatever, but let me take you to another place where you can give them a real curse,” so the two try again. But will the results be any different?

“Curse” #2

With the second attempt to curse the words are just a bit veiled to those who aren’t following along but if you are aware of the context you know *exactly* what they mean (Num 23:19):

*God is not a man, that he should lie,
nor a son of man, that he should change his mind.
Does he speak and then not act?
Does he promise and not fulfill?*

These are rhetorical questions that clearly refer to Gen 12. Did God speak the words of Genesis 12 and not intend to act on them? Of course, he will act and keep his promises. Again, Balak is quite ticked that Balaam has indeed blessed, so he asks him again, “would you please curse these people?!”

“Curse” #3

The third time that Balaam attempts to curse Israel the text says specifically that “the Spirit of the Lord came upon him,” effectively overtaking him and he uttered the very words of Genesis 12 (Num 24:9)!

*Like a lion they crouch and lie down,
like a lioness—who dares to rouse them?
“May those who bless you be blessed
and those who curse you be cursed!”*

Again, this alleged curse becomes a blessing! Remember what this does to Balak and how it answers the original standoff between the two opposing forces, namely the prophet and Yahweh. Balak who had intended to curse Israel will now himself be cursed! And Balaam, who was previously the enemy to Israel whose words were supposed to be more powerful than Yahweh has now been turned into an instrument for their blessing rather than their destruction. The bottom line is that Balak is very angry about all that has transpired. As he strikes his hands together in anger, he says “I summoned you to curse my enemies, but you have blessed them these three times” (24:10). Balaam says, well let me tell you what these people will do to you in the future and this time he does what he had been trying to do all along: summon up a true curse!

(Actual) Curse #4

The words of the fourth and final curse are these. Notice that there are no quotation marks in the heading this time! (Numbers 24:17):

*“I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near.
A star will come out of Jacob;
a scepter will rise out of Israel.
He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the
skulls of all the sons of Sheth.*



The words don’t deal with the nation *per se*, but specifically with an individual who is coming in the future. He will also be a star, who stands out, bringing light and he will be some kind of amazing leader because he will hold a scepter. But most importantly with that scepter he will crush the heads of Moab! What does this sound like? Is it a reference to Genesis 12? No, not exactly, it’s a reference to a promise even more foundational: this is a reference to 3:15. He’s saying that Moab, “you’re on the side of the snake and you’ll suffer the same fate as the snake, your foreheads will be crushed.”

1 2
3=15

In the end, Balak got what he asked for, a real curse, but unfortunately for him it was a curse upon him! And in the end we have our original question answered with an exclamation point. Will God remember his promises? The answer is a three-fold repetition of the promise with the

final emphasis on Gen 3:15. Will God give up on Genesis 12? Not unless he also gives up on 3:15 and he's not about to do that! These stories in Numbers, so famous because of the talking donkey, are only really illumined by remembering Genesis 12. Every story in the Bible assumes you've read all the books that have come before.

Conclusion

We certainly are not able to comment on every facet of the book, but we have been able to focus on the major distinctive---the relationship between Israel's choices and God's sovereign promises. In the first ten chapters Israel obeyed the Lord and it turned out well for them. These chapters served to contrast and highlight Israel's failure to obey in 10-14 as well. The rejection at Kadesh-barnea had lasting consequences for the wilderness generation and yet it did not ultimately cancel God's promises and promises for the nation. In a resounding affirmation of God's commitment to the promises of Genesis 12 in the story of Balaam we see that God will bring his people into the land, even if it is a generation later than it could have been. Israel's poor choices may have delayed God's promises for the nation, but they didn't ultimately cancel them. As Paul agrees "for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29).

With reference to the conditional love of God we can conclude this. Carson was indeed correct. A fully biblical understanding of God will appreciate his unconditional and his conditional love. These are not contradictory; rather, they are a normal part of the personality of a whole person. That is, even the best covenant relationships can be *hindered* or *cultivated* by the faithfulness or lack of it by the parties involved. The Bible teaches this in multiple places. Jude 21 says "Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life." If I can paraphrase Jude, he is telling us to keep ourselves in a place where God can righteously pour out his love on us. The most tangible illustration may be the prodigal son who strayed to the far country. Did the father love him there? Yes, of course, but he didn't chase after him and throw a party for him in the far country. He could not condone the son's actions and righteously bless him there. The father waited and when the son came home in repentance his fatherly heart burst open with blessings he had longed to lavish on his son but couldn't while his son chose to live far away. The Father *always* loved the boy, but he was able to lavish his love upon him more fully when he put himself in a place where the Father could happily and rightly bless him.

Home

More Love ?

Far country

Unconditional Love