

The Real Problem

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[0 : 00] Good morning, church. Would you turn with me to Exodus chapter 32? That's page 72 in the Pew Bibles if you want to follow along there. As Greg mentioned, we've been walking through the book of Exodus this spring and summer, and we're getting near to the end. And this morning brings us to chapter 32. We're going to walk our way through this whole chapter, kind of piece by piece. So let's begin first just by reading the first six verses. We'll start there.

Let me read this for us. When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him. So Aaron said to them, take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.

So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.

When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord. And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. Would you pray with me? Father, we ask that in this time, as we consider the text before us, by your Holy Spirit, you would give us the understanding that we need as we think about these things so that we might rightly know you, know our own hearts, and know more deeply the provision of grace that you have given us in our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we might live for you.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, so the other day, I noticed that my car was giving me this alert that I had run out of windshield washer fluid. You got to love cars that they just talk to you now. They just tell you what's going on, what's wrong. Now, there are some car problems that I can take care of on my own and other car problems that I can't. But you know, getting more windshield washer fluid and pouring it into the reservoir, that is definitely doable. I can handle that, right? That is a problem I can identify and fix. Of course, I had never seen this particular alert before, but I figured we had just used up all the fluid. Maybe they forgot to top it off at the last oil change. No problem. But, of course, I ended up kind of procrastinating and never got around to it. And it said it was empty for a long, long time. Now, the story thickens. About the time that we had run out of windshield washer fluid, someone had backed into our car in a store parking lot and drove off without leaving a note, leaving a nice dent in our front bumper. You got to love when that happens. That's a good day. And again, okay, there are some car problems I can handle and fix. Others I can't. Taking off the bumper, popping the dent out of it with a mallet. Yeah, why not?

[3 : 25] That shouldn't be too hard, right? So, one Saturday, I proceed to take the bumper off of our car. And as I'm doing so, as I'm about halfway there, as I pull the bumper back, I can see the windshield washer fluid reservoir. And sure enough, it's empty. No surprise there. But I noticed something else.

The hose that runs from the washer fluid pump to the windshield is hanging loose. And then I look a little closer and realized that the nozzle of the pump had snapped and cracked off where the tube connects, causing all the fluid to leak out. Now, at that moment, I have a number of epiphanies.

First, I am not a mechanic, and this job is going to take me way longer than I anticipated, and I'm probably not going to get it done today. I'm putting the bumper back on, and we're going to put this off for a little bit longer. You'll still see the dent in our car to this day, because I'm waiting for the part to fix the washer fluid pump. Second, I had totally misdiagnosed the problem. We hadn't just run out of washer fluid. When our car was bumped into, it had broken the pump, caused a leak, and all the fluid leaked out. I could have kept pouring gallons of fluid into that reservoir, and it wouldn't have made any difference. My car still would have been empty, because that wasn't the real problem. Have you ever considered that spiritually the same thing might be true of us?

That we might be missing the real problem? Of course, as Christians, we would all say that the real problem, the problem underneath it all, is sin, and that's true. But do we really know what we mean when we say that?

One of the main reasons we get so stuck spiritually is because we don't know what we mean when we say that. Why is our love and desire for God so cold? Why do we keep falling into the same old sins? Why is our service and love and forgiveness of others so begrudging? What really is the problem, and what do we do about it?

[5 : 39] Chapter 32 of Exodus is unique in the book of Exodus, because here we come face to face with the nature and the depth and the dynamic of the true human problem, the problem of sin. Of course, it's been in the background of Exodus all along, but here it comes out into the open. Nine times this chapter will explicitly use the word sin. That's almost more than the rest of the book combined. So here in this chapter, we get a chance to understand not just first the nature of sin, the true nature of sin, and second, the terrible consequences of sin, but third, what we can do and what we can't do about it.

And I hope this will help us not just to understand ourselves better, but hopefully to get us unstuck spiritually, to quit pouring fluid down the reservoir to no avail, so that we can really become the people God intends us to be in the love and the worship of him. So let's dive in then.

The first thing we see in this passage is the true nature of sin, and we see that in verses one through six that I already read for us. You know, we often think of the word sin as basically just breaking some arbitrary rules, right? Or maybe if we think a little more deeply about it, sin, I think often culturally is sort of some really pleasurable thing that only Puritans and social conservatives have outlawed because they don't want anyone to have a good time. That's basically sin. But you know, these verses show us that the heart of sin is what the Bible calls idolatry.

And idolatry is exchanging our love and trust in the one true God, our creator, and putting it instead in some created thing. Now, idolatry has a dynamic. It has a pattern, and we see it here in verses one through six. It goes from demanding an idol to making an idol to then worshiping and being controlled by an idol. Look at the Israelites' demand for an idol in verse one. Where does this demand come from? Well, at this point in the story, you'll remember that the covenant between the Lord and Israel has been made at Mount Sinai, and Moses has gone back up the mountain to receive the written law of God on stone tablets as a confirmation of that covenant. And while God is doing that, God is also giving Moses the instructions for the tabernacle, the place where God will dwell in their midst, and they will worship him rightly. But during this 40-day period, the people at the base of the mountain are growing impatient. Notice the word delay there in verse one. And their impatience turns to doubt and uncertainty. We don't know what's happened to him. And their doubt becomes contempt.

This Moses, they say, which is an expression of contempt. Rather than trusting God's word, which God gave them back in chapter 24, which was to wait, the people rebel and demand that Aaron make them gods who can go before them because this God and this Moses clearly isn't cutting it.

[9 : 03] And then in verses two through the beginning of verse four, Aaron goes right along and makes the idol. Now, in Egypt, there were a number of calf and bull deities. They signified strength and vitality and fertility. And the real irony here is that the Lord had demonstrated his absolute sovereignty over these so-called gods during the 10 plagues when he had liberated the people from slavery in Egypt.

And yet, the people go right back to those familiar forms of worship that they saw when they were enslaved. And then from the end of verse four through verse six, they worship the idol.

They ascribe to this golden calf not just God's deeds, what God has done. They say, here's who rescued us from Egypt. But they also ascribe to this idol God's name. Notice what Aaron says, tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord. And there Aaron is using the divine name that God revealed at the burning bush, the great I am. In light of that, some have wondered here whether the Israelites were guilty primarily of breaking the first commandment or primarily of breaking the second commandment with this golden calf. In other words, were they really worshiping other gods altogether, which is what the first commandment prohibits? Or were they trying to worship the one true God by means of a graven image, by the means of a representation from the created order, which is what the second commandment prohibits? At the end of the day, it's not that clear from this passage, isn't it? They kind of go back and forth because in reality, they're doing both.

And besides, you see, breaking the second commandment, trying to worship God through an image, inevitably leads to breaking the first. Trying to worship God by means of an image will always functionally lead to worshiping another god because the true God can't be captured or compared to any creaturely thing. He's holy. Now, the Israelites may not have literally believed that this graven image itself was the God, but it was certainly the means whereby they could control such a God and they could get God's presence and power into their lives. And that sort of exchange of the true God for an idol, that sort of attempt at manipulating God led to all other sorts of disintegration.

The final verse says that people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. And the word play there is actually used in other parts of the Bible as a term for sexual immorality.

[11 : 51] The people weren't having a garden picnic and playing bocce ball in front of the golden calf. It was an orgy. They were sinking down into explicit immorality. You see, having taken God into their own hands and making an idol, they now inevitably disregard his other commands for how life works best as well. Now, the important thing for us to realize today is that idolatry comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes. We're probably not tempted to fashion a golden calf, right? But what becomes your functional God when your life is full of doubt and uncertainty like the Israelites? When you've become impatient with the course of your life? Calvin rightly said that the human heart is a factory of idols. We can't live without a God, so we'll make anything and everything into one.

Mike Wilkerson, in his book Redemption, which is a study of Exodus, we might have copies on the bookstall, which is another really good resource for studying the book of Exodus. In that book, he distinguishes between a surface idol and a deep idol. A surface idol is the thing, the action that's sort of right there on the surface. For the Israelites, it's the golden calf. There it was. And for us, it might be the career that determines everything else in your life. Everything bows to the career.

Or it might be the addiction to pornography or to alcohol. Or it might be the obsession with exercise and diet and body image. But the deep idol is what's underneath.

The deep need for success that makes everything else take a backseat to your job. That deep need for approval that makes you run to pornography or alcohol to numb the pain of rejection.

Or the deep need for control that makes you count every calorie. In Acts chapter 7, when Stephen is recounting this episode before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, he says, in their hearts, they turn to Egypt.

[14 : 06] God has freed us from slavery, but our hearts constantly want to go back. Friend, how is it for you? What is your functional God?

What gets you up in the morning and gives meaning to your life? What's your consolation when you're uncertain or afraid? What's the thing you can't live without? Where do you turn to find value and significance as a person?

This is what makes me me, and this is what makes me okay. Fill in the blank. I guarantee it's not a golden calf, but it's something. You don't really know yourself, and you don't really understand yourself until you can answer that question.

Part of the reason we get so stuck spiritually is that we don't understand the true nature of our own specific sin. There's an exchange that's happened.

The creator has been dethroned by a created thing in your heart. And it's not enough to just see this general pattern. Can you actually spotlight the one or two even deep idols in your own heart?

[15 : 16] If I had this, then I'd really be okay. I'd be happy. If I lost this, then I wouldn't know how to go on. Now, maybe you're listening to this and you're tempted to say, look, I don't need anything that way.

I am strong and self-sufficient on my own. Well, friend, have you considered perhaps that autonomy and independence are your God? In any case, these are deep waters spiritually.

Maybe you need to get with a good friend soon and have this kind of conversation. Maybe you need to start praying that God will reveal to you the idols of your heart. You know, as I examine my own life, I kind of find it helpful to move backward through the dynamic or the pattern that we see in verses 1 through 6.

In other words, it's fairly easy to spot where I blatantly disobey one of God's commands. Like the Israelites eating and drinking and rising up to play in verse 6. Where am I overtly breaking a command of God?

Am I letting anger or frustration boil over? Am I letting pride or vanity seep in? And then go a step back from there. Why were the Israelites rising up to play?

[16 : 28] Well, because of the golden calf. And now, why might you and I experience unrighteous anger, for example? It's because I can't stand the house being so messy.

Rawr! A clean house isn't too much to ask for, is it? But then, take a step further back.

Why did they make the golden calf? Because they didn't want to wait for Moses and they wanted control and safety, so they reverted to the gods they had seen in slavery. Why is a clean house, that surface idol, so important to you?

Is it an overriding desire for comfort? I just don't want to keep bothering with cleaning over and over again. It's such a nuisance. Is it an overriding desire for control?

This is how I like things. And this is my domain. And this is how I show that I've got it together. So you can go from sinful action to surface idol to deep idol.

[17 : 37] And really see the true nature of your own sin. Friends, have you spent time to do that? Would you be able to follow that path in your own heart?

If not, you're probably still just pouring fluid into a broken bucket. But this passage doesn't just show us the true nature of sin, this dynamic of idolatry.

It also shows us the terrible consequences of sin. Let's pick up the story in verse 7. The scene shifts to the top of the mountain where the Lord and Moses are conversing. And the Lord said to Moses, Go down.

For your people whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. They've turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They've made for themselves a golden calf and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it and said, These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.

And the Lord said to Moses, I have seen this people and behold it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them in order that I may make a great nation of you.

[18 : 45] There are two terrible consequences of sin. First, in verse 7, there's corruption. Rather than magnifying the glory of God and bearing his image, living in the freedom of his love and power, when we worship idols we become enslaved and dehumanized.

The language of turning quickly out of the way in verse 8 and of being stiff-necked in verse 9. Those are animal analogies, right?

Beasts of burden would be stiff-necked if they didn't submit to the leading and the yoke of the farmer. They would turn quickly out of the way. And do you see the tragic irony here?

The Israelites worshipped a calf and so we're becoming just like it. We become like what we worship.

Don't we see that culturally? We worship sex and everything becomes sexualized. We worship money and everything becomes monetized. If we worship anything other than the true God, we will fall woefully short of his glory that he intends for us.

[19 : 59] We become, in the language of verse 7, corrupted. The second terrible consequence is found in verse 10. Idolatry brings God's wrath upon us.

What is God's wrath? It is his perfect hatred and opposition to all that is evil and wrong. God's anger, of course, is utterly unlike most human anger.

Human anger is almost always irrational, temperamental, unpredictable, and self-serving. But God's wrath is the utterly controlled expression of his perfect justice.

And friends, given all the evil and injustice in the world, a God without wrath, a God without a purposed opposition to evil and injustice, surely such a God wouldn't be worth worshipping and living and hoping in, knowing what we know of the world, would he?

But does the idolatry of the golden calf really warrant God's wrath? I mean, this is a bit of an overreaction on God's part, isn't it?

[21 : 11] But consider what idolatry is saying. On the one hand, idolatry is nothing less than cosmic slander.

For the Israelites to erect the golden calf and say, here are the gods who led us out of Egypt, or here is the Lord, let's feast to him. They were misrepresenting God to the world, portraying him as just another fertility god out of the oppressive Egyptian pantheon.

A greater lie couldn't be conceived. The God of liberty and steadfast love, the creator who keeps his covenant through thick and thin to represent him as an Egyptian calf deity?

Imagine showing up to work to find that an office memo is circulating, labeling you as a Holocaust denier. And it's signed by all your colleagues and your direct reports. Now you think, that would never happen.

That's total slander. Exactly. Idolatry should never happen. And what's worse, misrepresenting God in this way is not just dishonoring him, but it's misleading to others.

[22 : 30] Israel was meant to be a light to the nations, so that the nations too could come to know the true God of freedom and love as well. And now that light was being distorted, and the nations were no longer able to distinguish this God from any other.

But idolatry isn't just cosmic slander. It's spiritual adultery. In fact, the phrase, great sin, that we will see used later in this chapter to describe the worship of the golden calf, that phrase, great sin, is used in other ancient Near Eastern texts to denote just that, the act of adultery.

In Exodus 24, Israel had promised their allegiance to the Lord. God had taken them as his special chosen people. Their maker had become their king and their lover.

And now the people broke that allegiance, in effect saying that this incomparable lover is unworthy of our love. And to fashion another love of their own choosing and making, they used the very gifts that God had given them.

Where did the earrings of verse 2 come from, after all? From the spoils of the Egyptians that ultimately God gave Israel when he redeemed them from slavery in Exodus.

[23 : 56] And the very artistic skill that Aaron uses to fashion the idol, where does that come from? Again, all these good gifts come down to us from the Father of lights.

Isn't it true for us, friends, that the resources at our disposal and the very talents and abilities with which we use those resources, all of it, absolutely all of it, is a gift of our God, our maker, and our lover.

And yet with those very gifts, we pursue other lovers and other gods and other ultimate ends instead of him. So in the face of such cosmic slander and spiritual adultery, God is more than just to judge us.

God is more than just to judge us. To cut us off from his goodness and presence. God is more than just to give us what we ask for, a life without him as our God. A life without his gifts or presence.

A life of reliance on those false gods who enslave and bring us shame. In other words, he's just to give us the judgment of eternal death. So these are the two terrible consequences of sin, of idolatry.

[25 : 14] Our corruption and God's wrath. Friends, have you ever thought how the story of your life will end? What if you reached the end of your life with everything you desired?

Wealth, reputation, comfort, family, respect, and yet didn't have God? And what awaited you at the end of that life wasn't the embrace of your eternal loving creator, but his holy justice and wrath because you used all his good gifts to slander his name and pursue other lovers.

And not just that, but the legacy you leave behind you was not one of seeking God and prizing him, but of actively living without him.

Or even worse, putting some of those ends on equal footing with God. I'll have success and I'll have God. I'll have comfort and I'll have God. Trying to have both at the same time and thus really equating God with the created things is of equal worth.

Consider the end of your story and how many you will have led down the paths of idolatry by your own example. And how many will be headed to the same end as you.

[26 : 41] This is the severity and sobriety of what this passage is telling us about the consequences of sin.

But it doesn't have to end that way. The rest of the story in verses 11 through 35 deal with Moses' response to the nature and the gravity of the people's sin.

And through Moses, we can see three things that we can do and one thing we can't do. First thing, we can pray for mercy.

Let's pick up in 32 verses 11 through 14. But Moses implored the Lord his God and said, Oh Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?

Should the Egyptians say, with evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people.

[27 : 45] Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants to whom you swore by your own self and said to them, I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring and they shall inherit it forever.

And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people. Note the basis of Moses' prayer for mercy.

He approaches God not saying, God, the people have been so good in the past. This is just a little slip up. It's a little sort of blip in their character. Why don't you just overlook this one this time?

Neither does Moses try to minimize the sin of the people or excuse it in some way. No. The basis for mercy has nothing to do with the people themselves. It has everything to do with who God is.

The first thing that Moses asks for mercy for the sake of is God's reputation. Don't let the Egyptians think that you're a God of evil intent who led them out here just to consume them.

[28 : 44] What will the nations think? What will be said of your glory if this is what happens? And second, Moses asked for mercy for the sake of God's faithfulness. God had promised to bless the offspring of Abraham, to multiply them, to settle them in the promised land.

So Moses appeals to God for mercy on the basis of his promise. Don't destroy the people, God, because you've promised. You're faithful to your promises. And when we're faced with the gravity of our own idolatry, we too should pray for God's mercy.

And this is how we should do it. On the basis of God's own glory and on the basis of God's own good promises. God, be merciful to us, not because we deserve it, but because you're a great God who keeps his promises.

So we must pray for mercy. And second, we must destroy our idols. This is verses 15 through 20. Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of testimony in his hand.

The tablets were written on both sides, on the front and on the back. They were written, the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. Notice here that the people had traded the engraved word of God, whereby they would truly know God, for an engraved calf of God that led them completely astray.

[30 : 11] When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, there's a noise of war in the camp. But Moses said, it's not the sound of shouting for victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear.

And as soon as he came near the camp, he saw the calf and the dancing. Moses, his anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hand and broke them at the foot of the mountain.

He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it on the water, and made the people of Israel drink it. Unlike Moses, too often our approach is to tolerate rather than annihilate the idols of the hearts and our lives.

They've become too familiar and too comfortable for us. We're so reluctant to see them go. But rather than play those games, Moses understands that decisive action has to be taken.

After all, when he breaks the tablets at the foot of the mountain, this isn't an outburst of sort of rage and human frustration. No, Moses, in righteous anger, is symbolically portraying the spiritual reality of what their idolatry has done.

[31 : 26] It's broken their covenant with God. So Moses breaks the tablets to show the people how grave their situation is. And then he proceeds to destroy the calf as thoroughly as possible.

Now, it's not clear why exactly Moses makes the people drink the water that contains the ashes of the pulverized idol. Perhaps it's so that they remember the bitter taste of the idol for years to come as a deterrent to never do this again.

Or perhaps it's a way to show that the idol is less than nothing. Surely a God you can drink the ashes of is no God worth worshiping. We can't say for sure.

But more importantly, are you and I willing to not just plead God for mercy, but to follow through and root out the idols in our life? To be done with them completely?

To take even what might seem like extreme measures to be free of them? To do things that might make us look a little weird in the eyes of our neighbors? To be free.

[32 : 42] And that leads to the third thing we must do. We must take responsibility. Picking up in verses 21 through 24, Moses confronts Aaron now. And Moses said to Aaron, what did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?

And Aaron said, let not the anger of my Lord burn hot. You know the people. They're set on evil. For they said to me, make us gods who shall go before us.

As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him. So I said to them, let any who have gold take it off. So they gave it to me and I threw it into the fire.

And out came this calf. It's okay. You can kind of chuckle at that. It's a bit ridiculous. Now Aaron is just like us when confronted about our sin, isn't he?

First, he tries to pass the blame. The people are so evil. What else could I have done? It's really their fault. They threatened me. There was no other choice, Moses. And second, he minimizes his responsibility just like we do.

[33 : 50] I threw the gold in and out came this calf. I don't know. It just happened. It was a sign. How many times have we made similarly lame excuses? I mean, I stayed over at my boyfriend, my girlfriend's apartment until 2 a.m.

I don't know. It just sort of happened. I went to the bar with all my friends. I ordered a few drinks and I don't know. It's just, I got drunk. I don't know what happened. I don't know what happened. Rather than minimize and pass the blame, we need to take responsibility for what we've done.

We need to exercise the agency that God has given us that we might be done with our idols. The counterexample to Aaron is found in the next paragraph concerning the Levites.

Let's read verses 25 through 29. And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose, for Aaron had let them break loose to the derision of their enemies, then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, Who is on the Lord's side?

Come to me. And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. And he said to them, And thus says the Lord, God of Israel, put your sword on your side, each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.

[35 : 05] And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell. And Moses said, Now admittedly, this is a very hard paragraph to understand at first blush.

What is going on here? A couple things to sort of put this passage in perspective to help us understand it. First, we need to remember that overt idolatry was a capital offense under the Sinai covenant.

God takes this sin so seriously that in Israel, under the old covenant, the judicial penalty for it was death. Of course, today, now that Christ has come, the Sinai covenant is no longer in force.

So breaking the second commandment cannot and must not be judged in the same way. While idolatry remains immoral, it's no longer illegal. Moreover, the church does not carry the power of the sword, only the power of the word, exercised in teaching and correction.

So there's not a one-to-one correspondence in applying this passage today. But in ancient Israel, idolatry was a capital offense. So what we have in these verses is not some twisted version of vigilante justice, some kind of strange purge.

[36 : 27] But the Levites are acting as the legal judicial agents of the high king, the Lord, executing the Lord's just judgment upon his rebellious subjects for high treason.

Second, nearly all the commentators agree that the judgment executed here is targeted against the ringleaders of the golden calf incident.

It's against particularly those people responsible for misleading the people to break God's covenant. So there's a focus to it. Third, when the Levites are commanded, Did each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor?

That's a way of saying that they are to show no partiality in discharging God's command. If guilty, even close neighbors, even relatives, must receive the same just sentence for their treason.

And it seems that rather than minimize and pass the blame like Aaron, the Levites carry out God's command. And as verse 29 alludes to, this costly obedience leads to their eventual ordination in the book of Numbers to be the tribe that's set apart to care for and protect the tabernacle itself.

[37 : 39] Of course, the severity of this judgment is very real, and it's very hard to wrap our minds around today. I understand that. But in part, don't you see that's because we don't have a robust sense of God's holiness.

God is holy, and the wages of sin is death. And while today God no longer asks human agents to carry out his divine judgment, that right now, that right to judge belongs only to the risen Lord Christ.

He is the only one who will execute God's judgments. Still, the wages of sin are still the same. The wages of sin are still spiritual death. Today, however, we can still take responsibility for our actions like the Levites.

Rather than balk and minimize the situation, the Levites understood the gravity of the sin, and they stepped forward to do whatever God was asking them to do, even if it was personally costly in the extreme.

They would be on the Lord's side. And today, the whole church, led by the church leaders, are meant to be set apart in such a way, taking full responsibility to pursue holiness with devotion.

[38 : 52] Not, of course, enacting judicial sentences, but exhorting and encouraging one another to flee sin and pursue Christ. So in the face of our sin, there are at least three things we can do.

We can pray for God's mercy. We can root out and destroy our idols. And we can take responsibility for our holiness. But there's one thing we can't do. Let's conclude with verses 30 through 35.

The next day, Moses said to the people, You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the Lord. Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin. So Moses returned to the Lord and said, Alas, this people has sinned a great sin.

They've made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin. But if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.

But the Lord said to Moses, Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book. But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you.

[40 : 01] Behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them. Then the Lord sent a plague on the people because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made. Friends, the one thing we can't do is make atonement for our sin.

Moses goes up the mountain, realizing that even though God has relented and decided to not utterly wipe them out in one fell swoop, their guilt still remains.

Maybe you've sensed that. You've pled for mercy. You've done your best to get rid of your idols. You've taken responsibility for your actions, but the guilt is still there. The relationship with God is still breached.

The debt of sin still remains, and nothing you do seems to change it. Moses goes up the mountain with an almost unbelievably loving plan.

Perhaps, he says, I can make atonement for your sin. And Moses' proposal to God is that he, Moses, be blotted out for the sake of the people.

[41 : 09] If you'll forgive their sin, well and good, Moses says, but if not, if you require a price to be paid, then blot me out instead of them. Do you see, friends, how in many ways, this whole chapter becomes a test for Moses, a test through which his virtue shines.

Moses, as a leader and as a mediator and as the shepherd of God's people here, really comes into his own. Look back at verse 10. God offers to start his redemptive plan over with Moses in verse 10.

I'm going to make you a new Abraham and make a new people from you, Moses, because these people have broken their covenant with me. And what does Moses do? Hey, that sounds like a pretty good idea. I'm sick of these people too.

Sign me up, God. No. Instead, Moses intercedes for the sinful people instead. What love.

Oh, to have a Moses in your life like that who would trade his own glory and his own kingdom for you.

[42 : 26] But even Moses, great as he was, could not atone for the people's sins. God flatly denies Moses' prayer. Yes, the plan will go forward.

God will send his angel to lead the people, but their guilt will remain on them. A plague will strike many in verse 35. We're not told anything else about it. But eventually, as the history of Israel will unfold through many generations, the people will be consumed in the judgment of exile with only a remnant that remains.

Why wasn't Moses enough? Who else could we find?

Moses wasn't enough because Moses too was a sinner. The rest of the Pentateuch will reveal that even Moses needs a mediator.

Even Moses needs atonement. You see, Moses could come down the mountain and crack the stone tablets. He could symbolically break the covenant, but he wouldn't ultimately be the one to repair it.

[43 : 32] Moses pleaded with God, God, let me be the representative. Let me be the substitute for the people's sins. Let me take the logic of the sacrifices that you've just told me about and let me take it to its conclusion and let me stand for the people.

And God says, no. No. No. Because you see, a greater substitute had already been appointed, friends. Before the ages began, in the eternity before creation, God the Father and God the Son had already made a pact.

They had already made a binding covenant that the Son, the Word of the Father, would take human nature into his own person and he would fulfill the covenant that we had broken and in himself he would bear our sin because he was perfect and unblemished and fully God and fully human and able to carry the weight.

You see, the written Word of God here in Exodus 32 is cracked at the foot of Mount Sinai speaking of our judgment. But in the fullness of time, on a mountain outside of Jerusalem, the incarnate Word of God would be crushed for our iniquities and the Lord would lay on him the iniquity of us all and he would remove our guilt forever.

Guilty, vile, and helpless we, the song goes. Spotless Lamb of God was he. Full atonement. Can it be? Hallelujah.

[45 : 08] What a Savior. Now, there's no more perhaps, as Moses said in verse 30. Atonement has been made fully through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Raised on the third day proving that the sacrifice was complete, ascended to heaven to intercede on our behalf with an intercession that far surpasses anything that Moses could have dreamed of or ever done.

Jesus always lives to make intercession for those who trust in him. Friends, don't you see, you have an even greater Moses. the one thing you can't do has been done for you through the costly love of Jesus on the cross.

You can't earn it and you can only receive it as a gift as you lay your life into the risen life of Jesus. And that's what will get down into the deep places of your heart, those deep idols, and begin to dethrone them.

Friends, that's what you really need to get unstuck spiritually. That's what will repair you at the deepest level when you see that Christ, the crucified and risen Jesus, is all the comfort and all the success and all the power and glory and all the honor that you will ever need and that he loves you and embraces you and takes you as his own.

[46 : 37] When you see that having him is better than all of those things and that surrendering to him is perfect freedom, when you let your heart sink into that, into him, those idols start to fall.

It's a battle every day, but it's a battle that Christ allows us to win. He's why we never need to go back to the gods of Egypt.

He is all that we need and he receives all who come to him. Would you pray with me? Father, we pray that you would exalt the Lord Jesus in our hearts by your Holy Spirit.

Lord, would you breathe new life into hearts that are here this morning and who are not alive to you? And for those whom you've called to yourself, would you help us to see Christ with a fresh splendor so that we might plead for your mercy and cast down our idols and so that we might take responsibility with a whole new frame, God, not trying to earn your favor, but now and as an expression of love for you, of confidence in you because you have done what we can't do.

Oh Lord, would you work these things into your heart, we pray. Amen.