



Exodus - Chapter Thirty Two

II. Exodus 19:1-40:38 - The Covenant at Sinai (continues)

Summary of Chapter Thirty Two

While Moses was up on Mount Sinai with God, the people lost heart and rebelled against the Lord. They persuaded Aaron to make them a golden calf, which he did and they held a worship festival to it.

God told Moses to leave him alone and return to the people who had rebelled against him, indicating that he would now destroy them and make his nation out of Moses' alone. However, Moses pleaded on behalf of the people, not for their sake but for the sake of God's name and the Lord relented.

Moses descended the mountain with the Ten Commandments in his hand. In his anger, he threw the tablets to the ground and smashed them; then he totally destroyed the golden calf and disposed of the precious metal it was made from.

Moses anger burned against Aaron too, who offered the excuse that he could not prevent the people from having their will. Moses then called the Levites to his side and instructed them to go among the people and they killed three thousand of them. Thus the Levites were consecrated to serve God.

The next day, Moses returned to the mountain of the Lord to ask him to forgive the Israelites, offering his own salvation for God's mercy. God did not blot Moses out of his book but he did say the sinners would be judged at the appropriate time; and he sent a plague against the people.

II.f Exodus 32:1-34:35 - Covenant Breach, Intercession, and Renewal

Between the instructions for the tabernacle (25:1-31:17) and their being carried out (35:1-40:33) is a section of narrative that illustrates Israel's need for the sanctifying work of the Lord: the people of Israel break the covenant (32:1-35), the

Lord responds in anger, but Moses intercedes for the people (33:1-23), and the Lord renews the covenant (34:1-35).

II.f.i Exodus 32:1-35 - The Golden Calf

After hearing the Lord speak from Mount Sinai (20:22) and agreeing to keep the covenant (24:3-7), the people of Israel become impatient with the length of time Moses is up on the mountain and break the covenant by making an idol and worshipping it with offerings and a festival (vv.1-6). The rest of the account focuses on Moses' actions: upon coming down the mountain he breaks the tablets in anger (vv.15-19), destroys the idol (v.20), receives from Aaron a lame, self-serving explanation of the event (vv.21-24), and executes judgement (vv.25-29), before going back up the mountain to intercede for the people again (vv.30-34). While illustrating the unfaithfulness of many of the people, the account highlights the faithful maturing of Moses as a leader and shows him bearing aspects of the Lord's character.

¹ When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Come, make gods for us, 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.'

Exodus 32:1

Moses delayed to come down from the mountain. This troubled the people of Israel. It is true that Moses delayed, but God had a wonderful purpose for Moses' delay, and it would soon be over. Yet because the people could not see the reason for the delay they allowed it to make them stumble. Moses was gone for forty days (24:18). This probably seemed like a long time to the people, but a short time to Moses. Certainly it was a short time related to the outworking of God's plan for Israel. How believers handle God's ordained delays is a good measure of their spiritual maturity. If they allow such delays to make them drift off into sin or lapse into resignation to fate, then they react poorly to his ordained delays. If they allow such times to deepen their perseverance in following God, then they are of good use.

The people gathered around Aaron and said to him. This sinful impulse came first from the people, not Aaron. The episode of sin described in this chapter started at the impulse of popular opinion. This is an example of where the will of the people is not always the will of God. This is true in society in general, but it is also true among God's people. When it comes to representing God in the world and in serving mankind, there is danger in starting in what people want or what they feel that they need.

Make gods for us, who shall go before us. The people wanted gods to go before them, leading them to the Promised Land. They knew the Lord led them out of Egypt and they knew the Lord God had revealed himself at Mount Sinai. Yet, they were willing to trust a god they could make to finish what the Lord began. In the NT, Stephen's response before the high priest recounts aspects of Israel's history and says of this event that Israel <<*pushed him (Moses) aside, and in their hearts they turned back to Egypt*>> (Acts 7:39b).

The apostle Paul dealt with the same error with the Galatians: <<*Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?*>> (Galatians 3:3). It is possible to begin the Christian life trusting Jesus, and then at a later time to trust self or one's own spirituality. Following one's own gods is no better for a believer than it was for ancient Israel.

We do not know what has become of him. Not knowing led Israel into sin. Frustrated because of this uncertainty, Israel turned to idolatry and sin. They had not learned the patient trust that is needed for a life of service to God.

² Aaron said to them, 'Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.'³ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron.⁴ He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'

Exodus 32:2-4

Take off the gold rings and bring them to me. God told Moses to receive a free-will offering to gather materials for the tabernacle (25:1-7). Before Moses came down from Mount Sinai and received this God-commanded offering, Aaron received the offering of gold to make an idol. The people were generous in response - all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. By nature people are generous in what they give to their idols. They should be even more generous with what they give to the living God.

He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, and cast an image of a calf. This was not the Spirit-inspired craftsmanship of Bezaleel and Aholiab mentioned in 31:1-6. This was the sin-inspired work of Aaron. He thought it out, melted the gold, moulded it, and fashioned it carefully with an engraving tool. Calf is not a good translation of the Hebrew *egel*. A young bull in his first strength is meant: for instance, the word can describe a three-year-old animal as it does in Genesis 15:9.

These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt! The plurals these and gods may indicate that Israel considered the calf to be another god alongside the Lord; refer also to Aaron's proclamation of a <<*festival to the*

Lord>> (v.5). Whatever the people may have thought, their words and their actions are clearly out of accord with both the first (20:3) and second commandments (20:4-6). Their action could only ever lead to their eternal shame: <<***They shall be turned back and utterly put to shame – those who trust in carved images, who say to cast images, ‘You are our gods’>>*** (Isaiah 42:17). This incident also prefigures one of the most disastrous acts in Israel’s later history, when Jeroboam I speaks the same words before two golden calves, which he sets up for the specific purpose of creating an alternative to worshipping the Lord in Jerusalem; refer to 1 Kings 12:26-28.

Aaron did not anoint this thing as their god; he simply went along with the people as they proclaimed it as their god. He was probably flattered at their admiration of his creation. True leadership would have cried out, ‘This is idolatry! We must destroy this golden calf. You people are wrong in calling this creation of man your god.’ But Aaron was not a true leader. He was an example of the one who leads by following popular opinion. This shows the foolishness of idolatry. This statue of a calf did not exist the day before, yet they worshipped it as the god that brought them out of Egypt.

⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, ‘Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.’

⁶ They rose early the next day, and offered burnt-offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

Exodus 32:5-6

When Aaron saw this. Aaron was flattered by the enthusiastic response of the people. When he saw their devotion to this idol, he built an altar before it. He began to organise the worship of the idol he had just made. It was bad enough to have a golden calf the people praised for their escape from Egypt. This second step of Aaron’s was worse. He honoured and sanctified the idol with animal sacrifice. He made the calf, and then he made the altar to worship it.

Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord. This shows that the creation and the worship of the golden calf was not a conscious rejection of the Lord. Aaron and the rest of Israel probably thought that they could give honour to the Lord through the golden calf. Aaron was not crass enough to say, ‘Let us do away with the Lord God.’ As Israel saw it, Aaron did not take away the Lord God; he simply added the golden calf.

They rose early the next day. They served their idol with eagerness, energy, and personal sacrifice. People usually find a way to rise early for the things that are really important to them. This shows that Israel was willing to give their time, their sleep, and their money in the service of this idol.

The people offered burnt-offerings and well-being or peace offerings to the calf, which are the same offerings they had made to the Lord at the base of Mount Sinai just before they confirmed their commitment to keeping his covenant (24:5).

The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel. In 1 Corinthians 10:7 Paul cites this to show that simply being a part of God's people is not enough; God's own people must show faithful loyalty to him, and avoid thinking that mixing pagan practices into their lives is harmless. Less than two months before this, Israel heard the voice of God himself thunder from heaven, audibly speaking the Ten Commandments to the nation. That dramatic experience, in and of itself, did not change their hearts. It made many of them desire a less demanding god.

⁷ The Lord said to Moses, 'Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸ they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"'

Exodus 32:7-8

Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt. God called Israel your people, in the sense that they belonged to Moses, not to God; in this God suggested to Moses that he had or was about to disown Israel.

They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them. This is almost an understatement. They did not wait long to go their own sinful way: <<*But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the Lord of hosts*>> (Malachi 2:8).

They have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it. God described to Moses everything that happened, and even quoted the words of the people in their idolatry. God knew exactly what happened. The people ignored God, but he did not ignore them.

Introduction to 32:9-14

Moses responds to the Lord's statement about destroying the people and making a nation out of him (v.10), appealing to God's own reputation among the Gentiles, whom God intends to bless through Israel, as confirmed by Genesis 12:2-3 and Exodus 19:6, and his promises to Abraham (vv.11-13). Moses' intercession on behalf of the people results in the Lord's relenting from consuming them entirely; refer also to Numbers 14:12-21. However, Moses himself will be a means of judgement

on some of the people (vv.26-29), and the Lord will judge them further through a plague (v.35).

⁹ The Lord said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰ Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.’

Exodus 32:9-10

I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. God spoke as if he had seen enough, and he made a remarkable offer to Moses. If Moses would only agree, God would consume Israel and start over again with Moses (of you I will make a great nation). Hypothetically, God could have done this and still fulfilled every promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It would completely change the place of Moses, making him the new Abraham of God’s plan for Israel. Moses had the opportunity to be as revered as Abraham was, and to be honoured by every following generation. The phrase stiff-necked, common in the Bible, is a farmer’s metaphor of an ox or a horse that will not respond to the rope when tugged: <<*Like a stubborn heifer, Israel is stubborn; can the Lord now feed them like a lamb in a broad pasture?*>> (Hosea 4:16).

Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them. God did not ask for the opinion or participation of Moses in this matter. He simply told Moses, ‘Let me alone so I can do this.’ The clear impression was that if Moses did nothing, the plan would go ahead.

¹¹ But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, ‘O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, “It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth”? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, “I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it for ever.”’

Exodus 32:11-13

But Moses implored the Lord his God. Moses refused to do nothing. He did not fatalistically say, ‘Well, whatever God will do, God will do.’ He pleaded with the Lord, according to what he believed to be God’s heart: <<*Therefore he said he*

would destroy them – had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them>> (Psalm 106:23). There would come a day when no one could intercede for this stubborn people: *<<Then the Lord said to me: Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn towards this people. Send them out of my sight, and let them go!>>* (Jeremiah 15:1).

In his intercession for the people, Moses argues the Lord's words back to him when he refers to Israel as your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt. In his prayer, Moses first gave the people back to God. 'Lord, they belong to you and not to me. I do not want to be god over these people; only you can do that.' Moses then appealed to God on the basis of grace. 'Lord, we did not deserve to be brought out of Egypt to begin with. You did it by your grace, not because we deserved it. Please do not stop dealing with us by grace.'

Why should the Egyptians say. Moses next appealed to God on the basis of glory. 'Lord, this will bring discredit to you in the eyes of the nations. The Egyptians will think of you as a cruel God who led your people out to the desert to kill them. Please, do not let anyone think that of you, God.'

Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self. Finally, Moses appealed to God on the basis of his goodness. 'Lord, keep your promises. You are a good God who is always faithful. Do not break your promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel.' Moses reminds God that he swore this oath by the highest authority - himself: *<<When God made a promise to Abraham, because he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself>>* (Hebrews 6:13).

¹⁴ And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Exodus 32:14

And the Lord changed his mind. God answered Moses' prayer. God was going to destroy the nation, all Moses had to do was leave God alone and let him do it. However, Moses did not leave God alone; he laboured in intercession according to what he knew of the heart of God.

In the King James Version this phrase is translated: *<<And the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people>>*. Based on this, some believe God sometimes needs to repent of evil, or that God changes his mind. It is helpful to read other translations of this passage:

- *Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened (NIV).*

- *So the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people (NASB).*
- *Then the Lord turned from the evil which He had thought to do to His people (Amplified).*
- *The Lord was moved with compassion to save His people (Septuagint Bible).*

Numbers 23:19 says: <<God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind. Has he promised, and will he not do it? Has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?>>. Some say that these two passages contradict each other, and that this chapter shows God repenting and changing, while Numbers Chapter 23 says God never changes or repents. These passages can be understood by understanding that Moses wrote with what is called anthropomorphic or ‘man-centred’ language. He described the actions of God as they appeared to him. Moses’ prayer did not change God, but it did change the standing of the people in God’s sight - the people were now in a place of mercy, when before they were in a place of judgement. Also, it can be said that God did not go back on his word to either Moses or Israel. The principle can be understood that God’s promises of judgement are inherently meant to call men to repentance and prayer, and therefore avert the judgement their deeds deserve: <<Though I say to the righteous that they shall surely live, yet if they trust in their righteousness and commit iniquity, none of their righteous deeds shall be remembered; but in the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. Again, though I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die’, yet if they turn from their sin and do what is lawful and right – if the wicked restore the pledge, give back what they have taken by robbery, and walk in the statutes of life, committing no iniquity – they shall surely live, they shall not die. None of the sins that they have committed shall be remembered against them; they have done what is lawful and right, they shall surely live>> (Ezekiel 33:13-16).

Moses pleading with God to show mercy is reminiscent of the discussion Abraham had with him in order to try to save the people of Sodom and Gomorrah; refer to Genesis 18:22-33.

About the disaster that he planned to bring on his people. God did not destroy Israel, and he knew that he would not destroy Israel. Yet he deliberately put Moses into this crucial place of intercession, so that Moses would display and develop God’s heart for the people, a heart of love and compassion. Moses prayed just as God wanted him to, as if heaven and earth, salvation or destruction, depended on his prayer. This is how God waits for Christians to pray. Living under the New Covenant, they do not have less privilege in prayer than Moses had. They do not have less access to God than Moses had. The only thing they may have less of is Moses’ heart for the people.

¹⁵ Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain, carrying the two tablets of the covenant in his hands, tablets that were written on both sides, written on the front and on the back. ¹⁶ The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets. ¹⁷ When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, ‘There is a noise of war in the camp.’ ¹⁸ But he said,

‘It is not the sound made by victors,
or the sound made by losers;
it is the sound of revellers that I hear.’

Exodus 32:15-18

Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain. In the midst of this great idolatry, Moses and Joshua came down from their extended time up on Mount Sinai. Moses carried the two tablets of the covenant, written direction by the hand of God.

The writing was the writing of God. It is significant that the tablets were written by God’s direct hand. All law and morality must come from God’s standard and character, or be up to the opinion or changing values of men. Under the New Covenant, God also promised to write his law: <<*I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people*>> (Jeremiah 31:33b).

There is a noise of war in the camp. It could be said that Joshua was correct when he said this. However, the noise reflected a spiritual war instead of a material war. All the time that Moses was on the mountain with God, Joshua had stayed faithfully at his post somewhere on the mountain (24:13).

¹⁹ As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses’ anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰ He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.

Exodus 32:19-20

When Moses’ anger burned hot, his response images the Lord’s (v.10) and highlights the fact that Aaron has not handled the situation appropriately (v.22).



An artist's impression of this scene

When he throws down the tablets and breaks them, it is an apt picture of what the people have done in worshipping the calf. Moses had to deal with anger through much of his life. In anger he killed an Egyptian (2:11-12). In anger he broke the tablets written by the finger of God. In anger he beat the rock God commanded him to speak to (Numbers 20:10-11). This last display of anger kept Moses from entering the Promised Land.

Evidence of righteous anger can be seen when Ezra heard that the returned exiles were still not following God's decrees: <<*When I heard this, I tore my garment and my mantle, and pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat appalled*>> (Ezra 9:3), and in David's response to law breakers: <<*Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked, those who forsake your law*>> (Psalm 119:53). However, the most emphatic is probably Jesus response to the desecration of the temple by those turning it into a market place in Matthew 21:12-17, Mark 11:15-19, Luke 19:45-48 and John 2:13-25.

He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder.

This idol had been the object of adoration and immoral rites; yet it seems that no one challenged Moses when he did this. Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the authority and strength of a man who had been with God, and all Israel knew it. No consideration was given to the value of the gold. Just as something set aside for God becomes holy, something used to profane his name becomes worthless.

The significance of making the people drink the water is not explained. It may represent:

1. A further step in the destruction and desecration of the idol to have the people digest and pass it.
2. A step in the shaming of the Israelites for their folly in worshipping the golden calf.
3. A type of test, something like the test for adultery in Numbers 5:16-22, exposing degrees of guilt.

²¹ Moses said to Aaron, 'What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?' ²² And Aaron said, 'Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot; you know the people, that they are bent on evil. ²³ 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." ²⁴ So I said to them, "Whoever has gold, take it off"; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!'

Exodus 32:21-24

What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?

This was a perceptive question. Moses understood that this plan did not originate with Aaron, but that he allowed it and implemented it. As painful as it is, due to the gravity of the circumstances, there is humour in Aaron's feeble attempt to distance himself from responsibility by claiming that he merely threw the metal into the fire and out came this calf!

Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot. Aaron essentially asked Moses to calm down, and to not be so angry. Aaron had no sense of the greatness of his sin. He had no significant sense of the fear of the Lord, only a fear of his brother.

You know the people, that they are bent on evil. Moses knew this as well as Aaron did: <<*You have been rebellious against the Lord as long as he has known you*>> (Deuteronomy 9:24). Yet Moses had a sense of his need to restrain the evil of the people, while in this case Aaron actually encouraged and supported the sin of the people. Israel would continue this cycle of evil towards God, but he would never forsake them: <<*But after they had rest, they again did evil before you, and you abandoned them to the hands of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them; yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you rescued them according to your mercies*>> (Nehemiah 9:28).

Make us gods, who shall go before us. Aaron quoted the people exactly. But, he lied when he described his own actions - I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf! Aaron no doubt meant that this calf was produced by a miracle, it just happened. However, Moses, and everyone else, could see the human engraving marks on it (v.4). Aaron claimed this was a miraculous work, but the evidence of his workmanship was all over it. Aaron gave the classic 'it just happened' excuse. But it did not just happen. Aaron thought it out, collected and melted the gold, moulded it, and fashioned it carefully with an engraving tool. Aaron's sin was so great that only the intercession of Moses saved his life, as Moses states later: <<*The Lord was so angry with Aaron that he was ready to destroy him, but I interceded also on behalf of Aaron at that same time*>> (Deuteronomy 9:20).

²⁵ When Moses saw that the people were running wild (for Aaron had let them run wild, to the derision of their enemies), ²⁶ 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.

Exodus 32:25-26

When Moses saw that the people were running wild. This shows how great the problem was. There is no greater danger than for people to cast off all restraint

and do whatever seems right in their own eyes. The darkest days of Israel's national history were characterised by the phrase: <<***all the people did what was right in their own eyes***>> (Judges 17:6b). When man follows his own instincts, his own inclinations, it leads to ruin. They need to follow God's way, not their own, as these wise words spell out: <<***There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death***>> (Proverbs 14:12).

Who is on the Lord's side? Come to me! Moses gave the people of Israel the opportunity to make a stand for the Lord. The Levites, to their honour, sided with the Lord and with Moses. Sadly, they were the only significant group to come out clearly for God's cause at the golden calf incident. It only makes sense to be on the Lord's side. He is the creator, the redeemer, and the preserver. Yet being on the Lord's side requires something:

- Being on the Lord's side requires *decision*.
- Being on the Lord's side requires *action*.
- Being on the Lord's side requires *separation*.

²⁷ He said to them, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, "Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbour."' ²⁸ The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day. ²⁹ Moses said, 'Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so have brought a blessing on yourselves this day.'

Exodus 32:27-29

Each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbour. It is not clear precisely what Moses' instruction to the Levites meant in terms of whether there was any sort of discerning whom they were to kill. Given the Lord's words to Moses in v.33 about 'whoever has sinned against me,' it seems unlikely that the Levites' choices were random.

About three thousand of the people fell on that day. It seems that the sin of Israel at the golden calf involved more than these 3,000 people. Yet these were undoubtedly those most flagrant in their idolatry and immorality, or these were the leaders of the sinful conduct, or they were just random victims punished for the sin of the others as already suggested.

³⁰ On the next day Moses said to the people, 'You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.'

Exodus 32:30

But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.

Moses already interceded for the people in vv.11-14. Yet he prayed again for them because now he saw the sin with his own eyes, and was struck with the depth of the people's sin. Moses also learned on Mount Sinai that God's penalty for idolatry was death: <<*Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than the Lord alone, shall be devoted to destruction*>> (Exodus 22:20). He was more aware than ever of the distance between the people and God, and sensed the urgency to intercede.

³¹ So Moses returned to the Lord and said, 'Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. ³² But now, if you will only forgive their sin – but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written.'

Exodus 32:31-32

Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. Moses did not minimise the sin of the people or put it in soft terms. They were guilty of worshipping a god of gold.

But now, if you will only forgive their sin. Moses knew the enormity of the people's sin, yet he still asked for forgiveness. This was an appeal to the mercy and grace of God not to punish the people as they so obviously deserved.

But if not, blot me out of the book that you have written. Moses asked God to forgive Israel on the basis of his own sacrificial identification with the sinful people. If God would not forgive, Moses asked to be damned in sacrificial identification with his sinful people. Moses felt that Israel had sinned so terribly that the blood of a goat or an ox could not cover it; it had to be a man who suffered in their place. Therefore, he offered to be blotted out of God's book if it could somehow rescue the people. God said 'no' to the request of Moses; yet it can be said that God looked ahead to the sacrifice of one greater than Moses who would give himself for the people, bringing full and complete atonement. Of course, this sacrificial heart was the same heart Jesus had in dying for everyone's sins: <<*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*>> (2 Corinthians 5:21), and: <<*For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit*>> (1 Peter 3:18). Paul also had some of this same heart of Jesus: <<*For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh*>> (Romans 9:3).

³³ But the Lord said to Moses, 'Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. ³⁴ But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; see, my angel shall go in front of you.'

Nevertheless, when the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin.’

Exodus 32:33-34

God agreed to spare the nation as a whole, but he definitely reserved the right to judge individual sinners. The Lord affirms the presumption in Moses’ request that the Lord determines whose names will be in his book, a reality which is referred to in both the OT and NT in various ways: <<*the book of the living*>> (Psalm 69:28), <<*the book*>> (Daniel 12:1), <<*names are written in heaven*>> (Luke 10:20), <<*the book of life*>> (Philippians 4:3), and: <<*the Lamb’s book of life*>> (Revelation 21:27).

But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you. This was God’s promise to stay faithful to Israel and to keep his presence with them, i.e. my angel shall go in front of you.

When the day comes for punishment. Just as he had confirmed the existence of written records in his book, so too God confirms a day of judgement: <<*While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead*>> (Acts 17:30-31), <<*For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil*>> (2 Corinthians 5:10), and: <<*Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books*>> (Revelation 20:11-12).

I will punish them for their sin. That entire generation of adult Israelites, other than Joshua and Caleb, would never enter the Promised Land. That specific judgement had yet to be pronounced, but God knew it would happen.

³⁵ Then the Lord sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf – the one that Aaron made.

Exodus 32:35

Then the Lord sent a plague on the people. This probably describes the death of the 3,000 already mentioned in v.28, as there is no further reference to a plague or its consequences.