

# Covenant Broken

Exodus: Revelation and Redemption

Exodus 32:1-35

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Nobody likes waiting. That's why everyone hates the DMV and why if something doesn't have two-day shipping, it's almost not worth buying. But God often uses periods of waiting to test us, to see if our faith will stand the test of time.

In Scripture, a period of waiting and testing is often indicated by the number forty. Israel will eventually spend forty years wandering in the desert. Jesus will spend forty days in the desert being tempted by Satan. And as we come to our passage today, we find God's people in a waiting period of forty days.

When we left off in Exodus 24, Israel had just made a covenant with the Lord. They had this big ceremony, and then they ate a meal in God's presence. They had this amazing experience of communion with God. But now...they have to wait. At the end of chapter 24, God calls Moses up into his presence on Mt. Sinai to receive the stone tablets with the commandments on them. The rest of the people simply have to wait. The last sentence of the chapter says, "And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights."<sup>1</sup>

Forty days is a long time to wait. And right after they just had this big ceremony and celebration? It's almost like there was just a wedding, and a big party, and then the next morning the husband goes on a forty-day business trip. Will Israel remain faithful in this period of waiting on God?

The layout of the book of Exodus even makes us wait. We have to wait seven chapters to find out what happens next. The narrative doesn't pick up again until chapter 32, and before that there's a bunch of chapters with instructions about the tabernacle. We're going to skip those chapters for now; not because they're unimportant but because they're really important. Almost a third of the book of Exodus is spent on the tabernacle, so it must be important. It's the climax of the whole book. But it's split into two sections. Take a look:

Tabernacle Instructions Given (chapters 25-31)

Golden Calf Incident (chapters 32-34)

Tabernacle Instructions Followed (chapters 35-40)

First we have a bunch of chapters where God gives Moses instructions about the tabernacle. Then the narrative picks up in chapters 32-34. And then there's a bunch of chapters where they build the tabernacle exactly as God instructed. The second tabernacle section repeats the first one almost verbatim at many points.

So here's the plan. Because the Bible makes a big deal out of the tabernacle, so will we. But since it's repetitive, we're going to preach it in one section rather than two. Bottom line: we're going to be in Exodus through the end of the year. And you'll see that it really makes sense to spend Advent in the tabernacle. God dwelling with Israel in the tabernacle points forward to Emmanuel, God with us.

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

But for now, we're going to skip to Exodus 32. Remember, Moses is up on the mountain getting the tabernacle instructions and the stone tablets from God, and Israel is waiting. So let's see if they're up to the test. We'll start by reading just the first 14 verses.

### **Exodus 32:1-14**

*<sup>1</sup>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."<sup>2</sup>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."<sup>3</sup>So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup>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 out of the land of Egypt!"<sup>5</sup>When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD."<sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. <sup>8</sup>They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"<sup>9</sup>And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. <sup>10</sup>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."*

*<sup>11</sup>But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? <sup>12</sup>Why 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. <sup>13</sup>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.'" <sup>14</sup>And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.*

This is the Word of the Lord.

Well, I think we have our answer as to whether Israel can pass the test of time. The answer is no. They break the covenant they just made with God. But it's in this crisis of the covenant that we (and Israel) learn a crucial lesson about God.

And what we learn is this: God desires to be rightly known. That's my sermon in a sentence. That's what holds this whole passage together. God wants to be known for who he is. He wants to be known by his people, and through them to be known by all people. That mission is the key to everything God does in this passage, and it's the key to answering four questions that this passage raises. So we're going to divide our passage in four parts and see how God's desire to be rightly known sheds light on four questions.

### **WHAT'S SO BAD ABOUT IDOLATRY? (VV. 1-6)**

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The first question is, "What's so bad about idolatry?" We know that God is not a fan of their new golden calf. But why? After all, it's not really hurting anyone. We're often told that that's the measure of right and wrong, aren't we? If it doesn't hurt anyone else, then it's ok.

God doesn't see it that way. We're not given extensive details about the calf they built—only six verses—but I think we're meant to see it as a failure of epic proportions. What is so bad about idolatry?

The key is that God desires to be rightly known. Idolatry is wrong because idolatry misrepresents God. Idolatry lies. In one sense that's obvious: God is not a cow. But idolatry lies about who God is and what he's like in an even deeper way.

Let's take a look at how Israel goes wrong. They're getting impatient, so they tell Aaron, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us." They break the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 29:3). Aaron does nothing to correct them. He makes a golden calf for them, clearly breaking the second commandment: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them" (Ex. 20:4-5a). Now, it's possible that Aaron didn't think he was making *other gods*. He seems to think he's made a representation of the true God. He says in verse 5, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD," to Yahweh. But now he's explicitly breaking the third commandment: "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain" (Ex. 20:7a). He's associating the name of God with a false god. So Israel hasn't just broken one commandment, they've broken at least three!

In fact, they may as well have broken them all. Do you remember what comes right at the beginning of the Ten Commandments? God gives a statement that forms the basis of the entire law. He says, "I am the LORD your God *who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*"<sup>2</sup> The foundation of the law is rightly knowing God—knowing who the Redeemer is, who freed you. But look what the people say in verse 4: "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" They've confused who their redeemer is. And that's really what idolatry is all about.

Idolatry misrepresents God because it makes something else—something man-made—our redeemer. Idolatry rejects the only true God and Savior and puts salvation in the hands of men. We make gods who serve us, who do what we want, who go before us when we want and don't make us wait.

You might laugh at the Israelites for bowing down to a cow, but we're really a lot like them. One of our most attractive idols often beckons to us as a way to get out of waiting. The only thing worse than waiting in line is waiting in line without your cell phone, right? This beautiful work of human hands can easily become an idol. It does what I want. It meets my needs. It can free me from everything in this world I don't want: boredom, loneliness, sexual unfulfillment, ignorance. It can free me, if I'll only give it my attention, my affection, my worship—if I'll only put my hopes in here. If I'll make it my redeemer.

But maybe you've got a different idol. Do you know what it is? Idols can be hard to spot, but I'll tell you where and when to look. Idols are what we turn to when God is not behaving the way we want him to. When God makes us wait. When God allows our faith to be tested by hardship. That's when idols promise a way of escape. When God's not providing the security or satisfaction you want, you bow down to money. When God's not providing a spouse, you bow to pornography or romance novels. When God won't take away your pain—physical or emotional—you bow down to whatever brings relief. False gods can give a sense of the divine, but they're a man-made knockoff. They can

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<sup>2</sup> Italics added in verse quotations for emphasis.

play redeemer. They can give a feeling of freedom, but not the real deal. In the end, they only lead us back to slavery. That's how Acts 7:39-40 describes this incident with the golden calf: "Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods who will go before us.'" There is only one God and one Redeemer, and he's worth waiting on. The alternative is turning back to slavery.

So why is idolatry so bad? Because it misrepresents the Redeemer and looks for salvation elsewhere. Israel has broken the covenant by misrepresenting the truth about their covenant God.

And that means they're abandoning their very purpose as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. They're meant to represent a holy God to the watching world. That's also the calling of every human being. We're called to display God's own character through our obedience to him. You shouldn't make images of God because you are the image. He created human beings in his image, to represent him to the world. God wants to be rightly known, so he must be rightly represented.

### **WHY DOESN'T GOD COMPLETELY DESTROY ISRAEL? (VV. 7-14)**

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In the second scene of our passage, verses 7-14, we're taken up to the mountain, where Moses is meeting with God. God has seen what's going on down in the camp, and he reacts about how we would expect: he's angry. Rightly so. He's like a husband who's been cheated on, and only forty days after the wedding! So he says he's going to destroy them. All of them except for Moses. That might seem extreme, but it's really not an overreaction. It's exactly what Israel agreed to in chapter 24. When they made the covenant, they killed a bunch of animals; they spilled a lot of blood. It was abundantly clear to everyone involved: if we break this covenant, then it's we who will be killed. It's our blood that will be spilled. If you break the covenant, you suffer the consequences.

And all of the Israelites have broken the covenant. Look back to verse 3: "So *all the people* took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron." *Everyone* was involved. They took off the jewelry God gave them from the Egyptians and made a false god with it. So God is not losing his temper. His wrath is not only understandable, but just. It is the right response to Israel's sin. So we should really be surprised when we read in verse 14, "And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people." That's a major plot twist.

The question that this section raises, then, is "Why *doesn't* God completely destroy Israel?" It seems like he should. Why doesn't he give them what they deserve? Well the most basic reason is that Moses intercedes for them. He prays for them. But what does he say that could turn away God's wrath?

Once again, the key to every question in this passage is that God desires to be rightly known. Moses is successful because he realizes that. And he shares that desire. Moses wants God to be known for who he is, and that's the basis of his appeal. Why doesn't God completely destroy Israel? Because God has tied his reputation to his people. That's the heart of Moses' intercession.

Notice what Moses doesn't say. He doesn't disagree with God. He doesn't minimize their sin. He doesn't give excuses. He doesn't remind God of the good things they've done that might counterbalance the bad things. Moses doesn't misrepresent the people; he represents them. He tells the truth about them. And the truth is, there's nothing about these people that merits God's mercy, *except* that they're God's people.

When God defeated Pharaoh and redeemed Israel from Egypt, he bound himself to this people in a very public way. Egypt saw it. The surrounding nations heard about it. God made himself known to the nations through redeeming this people. What would it say to the nations if he then destroyed them? Look what Moses says in verse 12: “Why 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?’” If God destroys his people, it will say to the nations that he may be powerful, but he’s not a redeemer. He’s not good. He’s fickle. He’s a tyrant. Now, God would be perfectly justified in destroying them; they deserve it. But what would the nations think? God doesn’t just want to do good, he wants to be rightly known as good.

Moses knows that God’s reputation is tied to his people, even though they’re not acting like his people. Even though they’re trampling his reputation. They’ve essentially disowned him by worshiping other gods. So at first God says he’s going to disown *them*. Look how he refers to the people in verse 7. “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’re not my people, they’re yours, Moses. Then in verse 9: “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.” God wants to wipe them out and start over with Moses.

But Moses responds in verse 11, they’re “*your people*, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt.” “Relent from this disaster against *your people*” (v. 12). And here’s the kicker, verse 13: “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore *by your own self*.” And with that, God relents from the disaster he had spoken of bringing on *his people*. He won’t disown them.

It’s not that Moses changes God’s mind or tells God something he doesn’t know. I think God is testing Moses. He wants to see what Moses really cares about. He lets Moses understand his pain, and he lets Moses decide what will happen to the people. Look at verse 10: God says, “Let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them.” God doesn’t need Moses’ permission. But he chooses to make his response depend upon Moses, “Just say the word, and I’ll destroy them and start over with you. You know they deserve it.”

But Moses passes the test. Moses gets it. He doesn’t side with the people *against* God, he sides with the people *because of* God. He says, “Lord, they’re not just my people, they’re *your* people, whom *you* brought out of Egypt. You bound yourself to them. Even before this covenant that they broke, you made a promise to the people of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and you swore by your own self. Your reputation is bound to them. Lord, you are the plaintiff in this case, but you’re also the defendant. Relent from this disaster, not because they deserve it, but for the sake of your name!”

God desires to be rightly known. To wipe out his people would be to misrepresent himself to the nations. He’s a God who always keeps his promises. So there must be another way forward than wiping out his people. What will he do next?

## **WHY WOULD GOD ORDER A MASSACRE? (VV. 15-29)**

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After Moses’ conversation with God, we get to follow him back down the mountain and into the camp. Let’s read this next scene, verses 15-29. As we read, notice the contrast between Moses and Aaron. Moses gets it. He has the right priorities. Aaron does not.

### Exodus 32:15-29

<sup>15</sup>Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets that were written on both sides; on the front and on the back they were written. <sup>16</sup>The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. <sup>17</sup>When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a noise of war in the camp." <sup>18</sup>But he said, "It is not the sound of shouting for victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear." <sup>19</sup>And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. <sup>20</sup>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.

<sup>21</sup>And Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?"

<sup>22</sup>And Aaron said, "Let not the anger of my lord burn hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. <sup>23</sup>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.' <sup>24</sup>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."

<sup>25</sup>And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to the derision of their enemies), <sup>26</sup>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. <sup>27</sup>And he said to them, "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.'" <sup>28</sup>And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell. <sup>29</sup>And Moses said, "Today you have been ordained for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day."

That's intense. It's hard to imagine what that would be like. Imagine if we had an altar call right now. "If you're on the Lord's side, come up here. Ushers, please lock the doors. Everyone who's up here, if you're really on the Lord's side, then go kill these people you call your church family. Here's a sword." It's horrific. So the third question raised by our text is, "Why would God order a massacre?"

First, we should remember that the people broke the covenant, and they deserve death. God is not overreacting. In fact, the 3,000 killed here are only a tiny fraction of the whole nation. God's not trying to make the punishment fit the crime—otherwise they'd *all* be dead. He's trying to restrain their sin. The death of a few, causes many more to repent. The real question here is why *their own people* have to kill them. Why doesn't God do it himself? It's not a question of fairness, it's a question of methods. Why did they have to die by the hand of their fellow Israelites?

Once again, the key to answering our questions in this passage is that God desires to be rightly known. His reputation must be upheld. Therefore, God's representatives must value God's reputation above all else. He can't move forward with his people unless they get this. God needs people who value what he values.

That's the difference between Moses and Aaron. Moses represents God rightly, Aaron doesn't. Moses tells the truth about God with his actions. Aaron lies. Look at how Moses reacts to the people's idolatry. He values what God values, so he reacts how God does. When God saw the people's idolatry, his "anger burned hot." It says that three times. Then in verse 19, it says when Moses "saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot." Then he breaks the tablets, because the people have broken the commandments, and he utterly destroys the golden calf. And then he confronts Aaron.

But Aaron is not like Moses. Aaron doesn't understand the gravity of misrepresenting God. In fact, he's still misrepresenting the truth. He thinks he can just pin it on the people. It's their fault! Apparently, all he did was throw jewelry in the fire, and out came this calf! He's gone from lying about God by making an image to just plain lying.

Aaron doesn't care about God's reputation. As it says in verse 25, he "let them break loose, to the derision of their enemies." God's people are misrepresenting him before the nations, and it has to stop. If God is to be rightly represented, then he needs people like Moses. Moses cares about God's name. Aaron only cares about his own name. Moses wants God to be rightly known—by Israel and by the world. Aaron just wants to save his own skin.

The choice presented to the people is whether they're going to be like Moses or like Aaron. They have no hope of truly representing God to the nations unless they value God and his reputation above all else. Above even their own kin. So their ordination for God's service must be a brutal test. Will they value what God values? Will they repent, realign themselves with God, and uphold his name, whatever the cost? The Levites choose correctly. Three thousand others choose wrongly. We can assume that the rest, once they see the consequences, also align themselves with the Lord. Their sin is restrained by the Levites, who have proven themselves to be servants of God, but at great cost. "Today you have been ordained for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day" (v. 29).

But what does this have to do with us? God doesn't call us to kill those who don't worship him. (The crusaders got that one wrong.) But God does call us to value what he values, namely him and his reputation. Your life reveals your value system. What you do and say reveals what you value most—what you worship. If anything other than God is at the top of your value system, that's false worship, idolatry. Life is full of good things that can easily become idols. The surest way to know what you value most is to pit two good things against each other. If you could only have one, which would you let go of?

Jesus said it this way in Matthew 10:34-39: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law... Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Following Jesus is likely to cost you something. Sometimes it will feel like war. Sometimes it will feel like death. If you don't value God above all else, you won't have the stomach for it.

If the cost of following God was smashing an idol—say, smashing your smartphone with a sledgehammer—could you stomach it? What if the cost was losing a friendship? Being estranged from your family? What if it cost you your very life? If you value God above all, then the cost is worth the blessing. One of the blessings is that we become useful for God's purposes. God needs to be rightly known by the world, and when we suffer the loss of all things for the sake of Christ, we make him known.

Now, don't hear me wrongly. There are some of us who are so zealous for God that we're hateful of sinners. It's possible to lose friendships not because you're a Christian, but because you're a jerk. And that's actually misrepresenting God. If you value God's reputation, then you know when to speak truth and when to be silent. Every day you have a choice: are you on the Lord's side? Will you

make him rightly known by what you do, what you say, what you value most, and what you're willing to lose?

The Levites chose rightly in our passage today. Because of them, the sin of the people is restrained. But Moses knows it hasn't been dealt with. That brings us to our final scene, where we follow Moses back up the mountain.

## WHY CAN'T MOSES BE A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE PEOPLE? (VV. 30-35)

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Read with me starting in verse 30.

### Exodus 32:30-35

*<sup>30</sup>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." <sup>31</sup>So Moses returned to the LORD and said, "Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. <sup>32</sup>But now, if you will forgive their sin--but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written." <sup>33</sup>But the LORD said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book. <sup>34</sup>But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them."*

*<sup>35</sup>Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made.*

Moses knows that Israel's problem with God has not been resolved. The calf has been destroyed, the people have turned back to God, but there's just one problem. They need forgiveness. They need to make atonement. They need their guilt before a holy God to be removed. So he has an idea. He says, "perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." Even he thinks it's a long shot. He goes back to God, and he offers to take the penalty for the people. Moses has the right idea. He's aware that God is holy and just, so he cannot allow sin to go unpunished. He cannot be known as the good God he is if he doesn't uphold justice. A God who turns a blind eye to evil is no good at all. Sin must have consequences. And every single Israelite has sinned. But at the same time, God can't just wipe out his people. He made a promise to bring them safely to the land of Canaan. A God who doesn't keep his word is no good at all. Moses wants to uphold both God's justice and his faithfulness, so he offers himself as a substitute for the people. He'll die in their place! He's willing to do what Aaron certainly wasn't. But God says no. "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book."

Why? That's the final question of our passage. Why can't Moses be a substitute for the people? You should know by now that the key is God's desire to be rightly known. He redeems in a way that reveals who he is. To allow Moses to substitute for the people would misrepresent God's justice. It would be to make light of sin. The guilt of sin can't simply be passed along to another sinner. In order to atone for the sins of the people, Moses himself would have to be sinless, and he's not. Remember when he murdered that guy back in Egypt and hid the body? You can't just substitute sinners with another sinner, even if he's slightly less bad. So Moses isn't up to the task.

We'll have to wait until next week to see what God does about Israel. But we too need atonement. We have a sin problem, just like Israel, and God will not compromise on sin—he must be known as the perfectly just God he is. So we need someone perfect to die in our place. What Aaron was unwilling to do and Moses was unable to do, Jesus Christ was both willing and able to do. God himself became the perfect mediator and perfect substitute that Moses could never be. He died in our place. And God's justice was perfectly displayed.

Second Corinthians 5:21 says, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Christ was counted sinful and deserving of death, so that we could be counted righteous and deserving of life. If you put your faith in Christ—if you cast down your idols and trust in him alone to redeem you—you can live even though you deserve death, even though you’ve misrepresented God. Not because God is unjust. Not because he makes light of sin, but because Christ took our sin upon himself, to make us righteous.

Our idols can’t redeem us. Only our sinless Redeemer can. Because God desires to be rightly known. He redeems in a way that perfectly reveals who he is.