

## Theme: COVENANT COURSE CORRECTION

- I. Covenant
- II. Corruption
- III. Calf
- IV. Completion
- V. Consequences
- VI. Correction
- VII. Consecration

“Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house,’ ...But Christ is faithful as the Son over God’s house” (Hebrews 3:5,6 NIV)

**Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. <sup>16</sup> The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.**

**<sup>17</sup> When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, “There is the sound of war in the camp.”**

**<sup>18</sup> Moses replied: “It is not the sound of victory, it is not the sound of defeat; it is the sound of singing that I hear.”**

**<sup>19</sup> When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. <sup>20</sup> And he took the calf the people had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.**

**<sup>21</sup> He said to Aaron, “What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?”**

**<sup>22</sup> “Do not be angry, my lord,” Aaron answered. “You know how prone these people are to evil. <sup>23</sup> They said to me, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.’ <sup>24</sup> So I told them, ‘Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.’ Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!”**

**25 Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies. 26 So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, “Whoever is for the Lord, come to me.” And all the Levites rallied to him.**

**27 Then he said to them, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.’” 28 The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. 29 Then Moses said, “You have been set apart to the Lord today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day.” (New International Version (NIV))**

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You who are “for the LORD,”

Five men climbing a mountain split into two groups. Three of them, fit and adventurous, clipped along their own path up. The other two, “well-nourished,” turtled up at a crawl. Which group made it up first? The heavy-set ones. Why? They stayed on the path. The others got lost and had to correct course.

In the incident of the golden calf, the Israelites strayed from the path God had set out for them in his covenant, his treaty of love with his people. God sent Moses to put them back on the right path. Moses’ COVENANT COURSE CORRECTION is the path we consider today. In his grace, God himself has given us his own COVENANT COURSE CORRECTION.

Of all God’s people, two men—Moses and his aide Joshua—got to approach God on Mount Horeb. When Moses last saw the people, he gave them God’s covenant Law. They responded, “Everything the LORD has said we will do.” Then Moses went up the mountain, leaving his brother Aaron and a man named Hur in charge. Moses stayed there 40 days and nights. Afterwards, God sent Moses down the mountain for COVENANT COURSE CORRECTION.

God didn't send Moses empty-handed. Moses came down "**with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands.**" God himself wrote the words of his covenant law on these stone tablets. The covenant Law was like a contract, the agreement that marked Israel as God's people. These tablets were their Bible, their first great national treasure.

Imagine you received a letter in the mail. No return address. The sender God himself. The content tells you you are God's chosen child. Written by the finger of God. God's Word, the Bible, is that treasure. It *is* the Word of God. He wants us to cherish it, just as he wanted the Israelites to do.

But as Moses and Joshua made their way down to the camp, they found the situation worse than they thought. It sounded like a battlefield. The people danced in circles around a golden idol in corporate worship. In 40 days God's people have gone from promising to do everything God said to being sure the LORD has forgotten them to forgetting the way of the LORD! The camp has broken out into a raucous ruckus.

How can they? Just 40 days ago, the LORD spoke in his own voice to them, giving them the 10 Commandments. Perhaps months before, they saw the devastation God caused on the Egyptians, the 10 Plagues. They saw how God led them out of Egypt with their own eyes! Even the gold they used to make the calf, God gave them as plunder in the exodus! After God did so much for them, now they think he's given up on them? Or they gave up on him!

How can I, after seeing so clearly how good God has been to me, so quickly turn away from his commands? After being marked as God's child at baptism, how many sins have I committed? After receiving Jesus' own body and blood for forgiveness, how long does it take for me to forget how gracious the LORD has been to me and return to my wicked ways? After we read God's Word and take it to heart, it's closer to 40 seconds than 40 days before we're right back at our old habits again.

You probably don't have a golden calf set up in your living room, but how often don't we take the wealth God has given us and make an idol out of it—our homes, our careers, our families, our money. Every bit as much as God's people Israel, we have wandered far off the path. We need COURSE CORRECTION.

Moses showed Israel how far they had gone off course. His reaction to the people mimics God's. In his anger, God threatened to wipe out the people and start over with Moses. That's how much God hates our "little sins" of idolatry. Moses interceded for the people then. Now he hurls the tablets of the covenant from his hands. Tablets smashed. Covenant broken. No sooner had these people received this priceless treasure from God than they broke it. They, like us, desperately need COVENANT COURSE CORRECTION.

Moses points the finger where it belongs. He left Aaron in charge. Can Aaron explain what's going on? Nope. Nothing but excuses from God's chosen high priest. The people made me do it. I just did what they wanted. They gave me gold. I threw it in a fire. Somehow, a calf came out. Must be god.

While we may not be priests or even high priests, your pastors aren't free from guilt, either. Maybe you think pastors are somehow closer to God than you are. But so often we're the first to sin. We need God just as badly, perhaps worse, than anyone else. It doesn't matter who you are; God accepts no excuses for sin.

Neither did Moses. As mediator or go-between of that covenant, all he could do was break the tablets. Moses could not set a single sin straight. He saw the people desperately needed COVENANT COURSE CORRECTION, so he acted. Consequences followed. Bloodshed ensued. Yet not one life taken that day could make up for the crime committed. The Old Covenant remained broken. And it would be broken again and again before the coming of the new COVENANT COURSE CORRECTION.

The new covenant brought a new mediator, one far greater than Moses. What Moses was unable to do because he himself sinned, our great high priest Jesus accomplished. Moses couldn't forgive a single sin of Israel. Jesus forgave all sins of all people. The people broke the old covenant law. Jesus fulfilled it in our place. They worshipped a golden calf. Jesus worshipped the Lord and served him only. Moses shed the people's blood. Jesus gives us his own body and blood for forgiveness. As our great high priest, Jesus offered himself on the cross for idolatry and all our sins.

What a great Savior we have, who forgives our hidden sins the same as open idolatry and rebellion! Jesus didn't just CORRECT COURSE, but completed it in our place. He earned full and free forgiveness, an eternity in heaven for you and me.

But if God really forgives all sins, then why is my life still so full of trouble? Why did the Israelites have to die? Why do you and I still die? Sin has consequences. Through those consequences God calls us to CORRECT COURSE.

Moses needed to CORRECT COURSE so the Old Covenant would reach its fulfillment in Jesus. God's people were in danger of turning away from the LORD. So Moses took their calf and burned it. The remainder he threshed like wheat, then winnowed into flour. The resulting powder he cast into the water and forced the people to drink it. An unforgettable lesson. Their sin had consequences. If they wanted to retrieve the wealth they had just drunk—the gold they made into an idol—they could. It would just take them a couple days first. That's what the true God thought of their idol.

How do we CORRECT COURSE today? I doubt many of you will go home and cook your wallet for lunch, but if money is your idol, kill it! Whatever gets in the way of you hearing God and his Word, get rid of it! Turn away from the idols of your heart. CORRECT COURSE. Set your heart on the LORD.

Then there's the bloodshed. Is God really so violent he demands the lives of his people? Consider: the people's open idolatry was an act of rebellion against God. Under martial law, every one of them, from the newborn to the oldest, has earned the death penalty. In the same way, a single sin earns us hell. But of some 600,000 men, only 3000 lost their lives that day. Maybe that still seems like a lot. Greater than those 3000 is the one: the life of our Savior, the price God paid to forgive your sin. Moses needs to COURSE-CORRECT the COVENANT people so Jesus comes from them.

People keep talking about division in our nation. It seems nothing will unite us, either. But Moses stood in the place of God, one man against the entire people. He didn't use a clever speech or a political platform to enact change, but the Word of God. **“Whoever is for the LORD, come to me.”** The Word of God unites. It brought all the Levites

over to Moses. They followed Moses, who instructed them by God's Word to take their swords and strike the people down. So that same Word of God also divided God's own people. 3000 died for their sin, while others lived.

The Word of God still divides and unites us. That's even true on an individual level. The sword of God's law cuts us off from God. The healing salve of the good news that Jesus forgives us joins us to God. On a larger level, we have major disagreements with other church bodies and strife even within congregations. Like Moses, put the blame where it belongs. Leaders will be held more responsible, but ultimately, sin is sin. Sin divides us. God's Word exposes our sin. God's Word also unites us. We believe Jesus is greater than our sins. He brings us together as a family of believers.

In the end, the Levites "consecrated" or set themselves apart because they were willing to uphold what God said, even when it put them at odds with their brothers and sisters. The Word of God remains the only standard that governs all other standards in the Church.

Maybe by now you've figured it out. The details have been changed, but it's the story of the tortoise and the hare. Slow and steady wins the race. Stay the course. Wandering off gets you lost and in trouble. That's what sinners do, though. We wander. We go off course. Our gracious God didn't just CORRECT COURSE for us, though. He completed it in our place. Far greater than Moses, Jesus paid for all your sins. He will continue to CORRECT your COURSE with his Word until you reach the goal: eternal life in heaven. Amen.

"Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (Hebrews 13:20,21 NIV 2011).