

## Lesson 58

# God Punishes Idolatry

The Israelites disobeyed God when they made and worshipped a golden calf.

# Overview

## Lesson Focus

The Israelites grew impatient waiting for Moses to return from Mount Sinai and worshipped a golden calf that Aaron made. God was ready to destroy them because of their sin. But Moses interceded, and God showed mercy.

## Key Passages

Exodus 32:1–4, 32:24

## Memory Verse

Exodus 20:1–3 And God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."

## Prepare to Share

## Scriptural Background

Prepare to teach by preparing your heart. Read the key passages for this lesson along with this background.

God gave the Ten Commandments to the Israelites at Mount Sinai in the wilderness (Exodus 20:1–17), and the people asked Moses to mediate for them to God because they were afraid (Exodus 20:18–21). God then gave Moses civil and ceremonial laws to govern the people as a new nation (Exodus 21–23). Moses told the people everything God commanded them to do, and the people promised to obey the Lord in a covenant ceremony (Exodus 24:3–8). Exodus 25–31 provide God's detailed instructions for the tabernacle and its furnishings, the priests' garments and consecration ceremony, and the men called to do the work. God gave Moses two tablets of stone with the laws, written with God's own finger (Exodus 31:18). While Moses was up on the mountain with the Lord, the Israelites grew impatient and came to Aaron, demanding that he make them gods to go before them (Exodus 32:1). Feeling pressured and uncertain about Moses' delay, Aaron requested the people's gold, and he fashioned a golden calf. The people worshipped the calf as their deliverer from Egypt (Exodus 32:2–4). Aaron built an altar to the Lord and proclaimed a feast the following day, but the people used the feast to celebrate as the pagans did (Exodus 32:5–6). The Israelites combined pagan idol worship with worship of God. This occurred not long after they had promised to obey all of God's commands! Here they broke the first two of the Ten Commandments.

Meanwhile, God knew what was happening in the camp and told Moses that the people had sinned. God said that they must be destroyed, but that he would make Moses into a great nation. Moses pleaded with the Lord on behalf of the Israelites, reminding God that they were God's people, delivered by his mighty

acts. Moses didn't want the Egyptians to say that God had brought the Israelites into the wilderness only to kill them. Then Moses reminded God of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them many descendants and a land (Exodus 32:11–13). This intercession by Moses showed his love for the people, his humble heart (refusing to be made into a great nation himself), and his special relationship with the Lord, who answered his prayer and spared the people.

Moses and Joshua returned to the camp to find the people out of control. In righteous anger, Moses threw down the stone tablets of the testimony, and they broke. He then burned the golden calf, ground it to powder, and made the Israelites drink it. Moses confronted Aaron, asking for an explanation of what happened, but Aaron just blamed the people. Finally, Moses called for men who were willing to follow the Lord, and men from the tribe of Levi gathered to him. They went through the camp killing about 3,000 men who refused to repent (Exodus 32:15–28).

Once order was restored, Moses returned to the mountaintop to confess the people's sin, and God sent a plague as punishment (Exodus 32:30–35). This account demonstrates God's justice (he punished sin), but also his mercy (he spared the nation and kept them as his people). The men of Levi were ordained for God's service as a blessing for their obedience to him (Exodus 32:28–29). God punished the guilty and rewarded the faithful.

## Historical/Apologetics Background

The idolatry of the Israelites at Mount Sinai revealed another sin that would plague the nation throughout its history—syncretism. Syncretism involves combining two or more religious beliefs, traditions, or systems into a new one. Unfortunately, the Israelites' time in Egypt exposed them to polytheism and idolatry. The people not only requested gods to go before them, but they also attributed the Exodus to Moses (Exodus 32:1). Even their feast to the Lord turned into a drunken party similar to those associated with the fertility cults of pagan peoples (Exodus 32:6). God had specifically commanded them to worship him alone and to not make carved images or bow down to them (Exodus 20:3–6). He also had warned them to destroy the false gods of the nations they would be conquering (Exodus 23:23–25). He knew they would be tempted to incorporate worship of God with the false gods of the surrounding people—and that is exactly what happened. Failing to obey God's command to utterly destroy the people and their gods led to generation after generation of the Israelites sinning against the Lord, facing punishment from conquering nations, then crying out for forgiveness and deliverance (see the book of Judges). Over and over, God admonished and warned his people what would happen because of their idolatry, but they continued to sin.

The bright spot in the account of the golden calf is Moses' mediation and intercession for the people. He prayed for mercy, and God gave it. The New Testament describes Jesus Christ as a mediator (Hebrews 9:15), the only mediator between God and men (1 Timothy 2:5). Moses interceded for the Israelites to God, and Jesus intercedes for sinners to God. Both asked on behalf of the people, and God provided mercy and forgiveness. Jesus even asked God

to forgive those who were crucifying him (Luke 23:33–34)! But people who refuse to repent and turn to Jesus will face God’s judgment (2 Thessalonians 1:8–9). Both Moses and Jesus were humble (Numbers 12:3; Philippians 2:5–8). Neither sought to use God’s power to promote themselves. Both showed sacrificial love for the people they interceded for. Moses offered his own life rather than see the Israelites disinherited or destroyed (Exodus 32:32). Jesus paid the ultimate sacrifice of giving his own life to save sinners (Philippians 2:8). No love is greater than his (Romans 5:8)! How grateful we are to have Jesus as our intercessor. He is praying for his children even now (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25)!

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