

# Golden Calf Incident at Mount Sinai

Exodus 32:1-35

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## Bible Memory Verse

1 John 1:9 NIV

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

## Bible Story

This story pops out of what has been (in Exodus) an instructional account of how to make the tabernacle and how the Israelites are to live and act in this new land they are heading to. Ever since the declaration of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, this exposition has been going on. The reader of this text would thus be “awakened” (so to speak) to this narrative story that jumps off the page here in Exodus 32.

The text tells us that:

*“the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, ‘Come, 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’” (Exodus 32:1).*

This would become a sort of benchmark for how the people of Israel would behave from here on in their history. They were a very forgetful people; a very impatient people; a very stiff-necked, stubborn, and rebellious people. The Israelites decided that they wanted to make their own gods to worship. It is easy for us many, many years later reading this account to realize the futility of their behavior, but we weren’t there feeling what they felt. Yes, they still acted in utter disobedience, but who is to say that many, many years later

from now, if an account was written of your personal history, would you be portrayed as acting in utter disobedience at times? The history and account of the people of Israel is a mirror of all of human history and our disobedient behavior. We find ourselves in their shoes when we “read the Bible” in our current circumstances. Nonetheless, the people did drastically disobey the Lord’s commands that they had agreed to not but 12 chapters earlier. Remember the “thou shalt have no other gods before me... and thou shalt not make an idol of any kind?” Well, they must have forgot this part.

What is even worse is that their interim leader (while Moses was getting instructions from the Lord) was Aaron and he indulged the people in their sins. Aaron instructed the people to give all their gold to him and then he fashioned them an idol in the form of a calf—the Golden Calf. Then they attributed their rescue from Egypt to this inanimate object. “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt” (Exodus 32:4). The next day they held a huge festival to the Lord, via the Golden Calf (very warped thinking... but remember, our thinking can get pretty warped, too). The people of Israel indulged themselves in one wild party, so wild in fact that it was heard up on the mountain where Moses and Joshua were.

The Lord told Moses what was happening, that the people had been quick to turn away from the Lord and He was going to destroy them and then make Moses into a great nation. Moses quickly reacted and interceded for the people:

*“O Lord, why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth?’ Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people... Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened” (Exodus 32:11-12, 14).*

Moses went to bat for the people even before he had a chance to comprehend the situation. He interceded, stood in the place for, the people of Israel even though they were acting wicked and were doing terrible things.

Those of us who are followers of Jesus can rest assured that we have someone interceding for us, standing in our place for us—Jesus Christ. He stands before God as our once-for-all sacrifice, while Satan tries to continually accuse us of bad things. Jesus is our high priest, like Moses, who asks God for mercy on behalf of his beloved children. And we get it. Now that is grace, getting something that we do not deserve.

Then Moses went down the mountain and when he saw the wickedness of the people he became enraged and threw down the tablets which contained the writing by the finger of God, the law. The tablets broke into pieces at the foot of the mountain. Moses then took the Golden Calf had it thrown and burned in the fire, then ground into powder and scattered in the water and made all the Israelite people drink it!! Aaron had some lame

excuse to Moses when asked why he led them in such a great sin: "I threw in the gold jewelry and out came this calf!" (Exodus 32:24). Go figure!

What happened next was judgment. The Levites rallied to Moses and they each strapped a sword to their side and went through the camp from one end to the other, killing his brother, friend, and neighbor. About three thousand people died that day. We would like to hope this was the group that had participated in the revelry of the Golden Calf, but we are not sure. It is most likely that the whole community participated in this sin and some suffered the judgment. They then were instructed to begin their journey again with the angel of the Lord leading them as before.

## Life Application

Patience would be an interesting application of this story. Had the Israelites been slow in their feelings toward Moses' absence maybe they would have not gotten to such a point as to create an idol for worship.

Impatient-ness is a plague among our culture today. We pride ourselves on instant gratification (my way right now) and want to enjoy things right away. The idea of waiting is not something we want to think about. Getting things when we want seems to be an American right.

However, according to Scripture, we are to wait upon the Lord. Although, not to the point of inaction, but moving only when the Lord allows and directs. This is concretely displayed in the journey of the Israelites to the Promised Land. When the fire and cloud moved outside and ahead of the Israelite camp then that was a sign to move on (not before and not after). They had a visual directive of when to move and when not to move.

Nowadays things are not quite so easy. There is no visual display or arrow telling us which direction to move or what action to take. We are to listen to the inner voice of the Spirit in our hearts and in our authentic community. Those who can hear the voice of the Lord, tend to be in step with his Spirit and a devourer of his Word. Patience is not found in self-discipline, but in the practice of loving our Savior and His Word through the Spirit of God.

## Review Questions

1. How long was Moses gone from the camp (up on the mountain)? A long time
2. What did the Israelites do to sort of replace Moses and the LORD God? They created an idol, a Golden Calf
3. What did the people use to make the idol? Gold
4. Who arranged to have it built for them? Aaron, Moses' brother
5. Why did the people turn to Aaron? Because Moses was nowhere to be found... he had been gone for a long time!
6. What was the golden calf capable of? Nothing!
7. Why did the people want an idol? Because they did not believe that the LORD God was taking care of them, or maybe because they couldn't see the LORD God and wanted a god that they could see.
8. What did the LORD God want to do to the people of Israel? Destroy them and start over with Moses.
9. Who interceded for the people? Who stopped the LORD God from destroying the people? Moses
10. Who was with Moses up on the mountain? Joshua
11. What was the Israelites punishment for their sin? Moses ground up the Golden Calf and made all the Israelites drink it, then he had the Levites grab swords and killed about 3000 people.

## Coloring Sheet

Next page



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