



THE BOOK OF EXODUS

LESSON 21– STUDY QUESTIONS EXODUS 32:1-20

DAY ONE

1. What thought from the reflection or commentary was especially meaningful for you this week?

Read Exodus 32:1-3

2a. The commentary skips Chapters 25-31. These intervening chapters contain detailed instructions by the Lord to Moses concerning worship, the priesthood, sacrifices, and the Sabbath. We last saw Moses when he went up onto Mount Sinai for forty days. Refer back to Exodus 24:14. Whom had Moses left in authority over the people?

b. Why do you think he might have chosen these particular men? Refer to Exodus 4:12-16 and Exodus 17:10-12.

3a. We begin this lesson with verse 1 of chapter 32. In verse 1 the people are getting restless. Why?

b. Who did they consult and what did they ask him to do?

4a. What reason did the people give for their request and what do you think motivated them to say this (verse 1)?

b. Read Psalms 106:19-22. Why did the people fall into idolatry?

5a. What did Aaron tell the people to do, according to verse 2?

b. Why do you think Aaron went along with the people's request?

6. How did the people respond in verse 3?

7. CONNECTION: The Israelites are restless. They can't figure out why Moses is taking so long. They are God's people and yet, as soon as God does something in a way they had not expected, they lose heart. Because Moses left them alone, they concluded that God must have forgotten about them. They decided to take matters into their own hands and they disobeyed God's express commandment not to form graven idols. When things don't go as we hope, it is tempting to forget the rules to choose a course of action that is contrary to what we know is right. Are you ever tempted to ignore God's commandments when things are not going smoothly in order to make things happen your way? Record some details about such a time in your life and how you reacted.

Read and record Psalm 73:1-2 and let those thoughts lead you into prayer.

DAY TWO

Read Exodus 32:4-6

8a. The people of Israel (God's people, mind you) brought all their golden earrings to Aaron. What three things did Aaron do with the gold he had collected from them?

b. The gold came from the plunder God told the Israelites to collect from their Egyptian neighbors before they left Egypt. For what was this gold supposed to be used? Refer to Exodus 25:2-9.

9a. When the people saw the golden calf, what did they say at the end of verse 4?

b. Read Psalm 115:3-8. What does this say about gold idols?

10. Swept up by the approval of the people, what did Aaron do and what did he proclaim, according to verse 5?

11a. In verse 6, we read of the celebration of the God's people. What five things did the people do according to verse 6?

b. Read 1 Corinthians 10:7-9. What does Paul say about what the Israelites did?

12. CONNECTION: This passage presents a stark contrast between Moses' faithful service to God up on the mountain and Aaron's arrogant disobedience down below. Moses had placed Aaron in a position of trust and responsibility. When the people went to him with their fears, he did not reassure them and exhort them to obey God's commandments. Instead he did as they asked and encouraged their infidelity. Has God put you in a position of leadership? How do you fulfill your responsibility? Do you use your influence for good or do you try to be popular and appease your kids, your students or your constituents, customers and clients with whatever they ask for—even when it's not good for them? Briefly explain. Use an example to illustrate your answer.

Read and record Matthew 18:7. Pray that you use your influence over others for God's glory. Let that thought lead you into prayer.

DAY THREE

Read Exodus 32:7-10

13a. What did the Lord say to Moses according to verse 7?

b. Why do you think He calls the Israelites "your people" and not "my people"?

14. In verse 8, God lists the wrongdoings of the Israelites. Record them here, numbering them as you go.

15. God reminds Moses that He has seen all of this perverse activity of the Israelites. How does God describe them, according to verse 9?

b. What do you think that means? (Spend a minute, holding your neck as stiff as you can make it. How does it feel? How does it affect your body's movement? Does that help with your answer?)

16. According to verse 10, God is angry with this stiff-necked people. What does He command Moses to do and why?

17a. As verse 10 ends, what enticement does God hold out to Moses?

b. Compare Deuteronomy (which means “second telling”) 9:13-14 and Numbers 14:12 with verses 9-10 of today’s passage.

18. CONNECTION: This is an amazing passage. God observes the perverted behavior of the Israelites whom He has loved, redeemed, protected and provided for. Now, they have turned against Him to worship a golden calf of their own making and have given the golden calf all the glory that belongs to God. Think of a time in your life when you have loved someone well and they have been unfaithful or disloyal, even in a small way. Describe the situation and what you remember about how painful that was for you.

Read and record Romans 5:8. Amazingly, God forgives us again and again even when we continue to be sinful or unfaithful. Write a prayer of contrition today asking for God’s forgiveness and thanking Him for His mercy and love.

DAY FOUR

Read Exodus 32:11-14

19a. In yesterday’s study we saw that the Israelites had turned against God and worshipped an idol. God became angry and commanded Moses to leave Him alone so His wrath could burn hot and He could destroy them. As today’s passage begins, Moses is interceding for his people. He is “imploring” the Lord. What are his words (verse 11)?

b. Considering the last phrase of Exodus 32:10, what does Moses’ intervention for his people show about his character?

20. According to verse 12, Moses knows his people deserve God’s wrath and yet he continues to plead with God on their behalf. He points out what the Egyptians will say. In your own words, what will the Egyptians say about God if He destroys the Israelites?

21. Continuing in verse 12, what three things does Moses ask God to do?

22a. In verse 13, Moses continues to plead for his people. He actually reminds God of His faithful servants! Who does he ask God to remember?

b. Moses reminds God of His own promises. What are the words Moses uses to remind God? Record them here (verse 13).

23a. An awesome thing happened as a result of Moses' intercession for his people. Record the words of verse 14 here and then reread what you have written.

b. Now read Genesis 18:22-23. How was the outcome of this similar situation different and why?

24. CONNECTION: Many times throughout biblical times, God's people were stiff-necked and rebellious. They turned from Him to worship other gods and disobeyed His commandments. Today we learn of Moses who, because he loved his people, interceded for them and saved them from God's just punishment. Verse 14 says, "God changed his mind" about the destructive plans He had for the Israelites. This passage offers one of the most hopeful consolations in all of scripture: we have tremendous power to intercede for the people we love. What a wonderful thing to know! What group of people – or even one person – are you interceding for, right now, in your own prayers? Record some details about this person you love, who needs your prayers of intercession.

Read James 5:13-16. Full of hope and consolation, begin your prayer. Stand in the breach before God and pray for all those who especially need God's love, salvation and mercy. (Don't think you have to be a holy patriarch like Moses to intercede powerfully. He wasn't perfect, either, remember?)

DAY FIVE

Read Exodus 32:15-18

25. Moses had begged for God's mercy on the Israelites and God "changed his mind" and spared them. What did Moses do, according to verse 15 of today's passage and what frame of mind do you think Moses was in as he began his trek down the mountain?

26a. Describe what he was carrying (verse 15).

b. Record the further descriptions of the tablets given in verse 16.

27. On his way down the mountain, Moses collected his companion, Joshua. According to verse 17, what did they hear and what did Joshua conclude?

28a. Referring to verse 18, name the two things Moses says the sound was NOT?

b. What *was* the sound?

29. Why do you think that the pagan worship of idols is often associated with sexual immorality?

NOTE: In Egypt the people had worshipped Apis, the bull, a fertility god. It is disputed whether the bull was made to represent Yahweh and was a violation of only the 2nd commandment or if it was worshipped as a god and was a violation of both the 1st and 2nd. In any case the Israelites messed up big time.

30. CONNECTION: Moses returns to the people carrying the stone tablets of the covenant. The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God; the covenant was the law of God. All this was God's gift to His people. But God obviously didn't work quickly enough to satisfy the people. They wanted instant gratification and took matters into their own hands. What in your life seems to be dragging on and on with no end in sight? How are you waiting for God to work in this situation? Briefly describe.

Read and record Psalm 137:5. Allow time for God to form His plan and perform His work in the situation you described above and in all areas of your life. With that thought, begin your prayer.

DAY SIX

Read Exodus 32:19-20

31a. Moses, feeling the pain of disappointment, approaches the camp. What does he see?

b. What were his emotional and physical responses?

32a. Why was it appropriate that Moses broke the tablets of the Law?

b. Once Moses actually witnessed the Israelites' idolatry, how did his reaction compare to that of the Lord's (verses 10 and 19)?

33. This sin was more grievous than any the Israelites had committed in the past. Before, their sins were often done through ignorance of God and His ways. This time they made a conscious and informed choice. What do you think would prompt such infidelity?

34a. No wonder Moses was so angry. What did he do with the golden calf they had made (verse 20)?

b. Why do you think he would make the Israelites drink the remains of the idol and what could that symbolize?

35. CONNECTION: When Moses witnessed the idolatry and infidelity of his people, his heart burned with anger. Yet, this is the man who stood in the breach to intercede for these very same people and refused God's special offer to destroy them and make of Moses a great nation. Moses hated sin with a passion, but he loved his people with equal ardor. Do you share Moses' hatred of sin? Can you separate your feelings about sin from the person(s) committing the sin? If you can, share an example to illustrate your answer.

We are told to hate the sin and love the sinner. Let that thought begin your prayer today.



THE BOOK OF EXODUS

LESSON 21– COMMENTARY
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EXODUS 32:1-20

Exodus 32:1-3

If we look at the last sixteen chapters of the book of Exodus, chapter 32 seems to be an unwelcome interruption. Moses goes up to the mountain and receives detailed instructions about how to worship God (chapters 25-30); the final chapters of the book (35-40) narrate how the Israelites carried out these instructions. All seems in order: the holy covenant has been revealed, agreed to and ratified, and Israel begins to live by it. But chapter 32 tells us a bitter story: the golden calf and the breaking of the tablets of the Torah. How can such a thing have happened?

Simply, because it happens all the time, human beings find it hard to live in the realm of pure faith. Israel already has a record of grumbling and complaining shortly after a grace-filled encounter with God [15:24; 16:2-3; 17:2]. In this story, Israel commits the ultimate sin: they want to be like everyone else; instead of the people God has called them to be. This failure of identity leads to inauthentic religion. Ordinarily this substitute religion is expressed as *idolatry*, literally, the worship of an idol. Idolatry is a two-fold sin: it reduces God to something a human can imagine and control, and reduces the human worshipper to a slave of something trivial.

Two of the most difficult questions in religion are how to name God and how to imagine God. Moses dealt with the first question in chapter 3, when the mysterious statement *I am who I am* was rendered as the sacred name, YHWH. Unfortunately, having a name for God deludes us into thinking that we have grasped who God is.

We all have some mental image of God. Most world religions have something visible which represents the presence of the Deity. The Egyptians often represented their gods in semi-human form, blending a strong, noble human body with the head of an animal whose qualities manifested some aspect of the divine. The Canaanites among whom Israel came to live generally depicted attributes of cosmic power rather than a personal image. One Canaanite image was a vertical pole as a sign of fertility. Another was a seated or standing bull upon whose back the god was imagined to be enthroned. The bull becomes the visible link to the invisible deity.

Recall that these stories were recorded in the days of King Solomon, a time of national unity. Rebellion was in the air, however, and civil war was about to erupt. Upon Solomon's death, Jeroboam, the leader of the northern tribes, set up alternate shrines so that the people would no longer travel to Jerusalem to offer their covenant sacrifices. The temple of Jerusalem, the visible link to the invisible YHWH, was replaced by shrines in Dan and Bethel. In these shrines the throne of YHWH was represented, not as the winged cherubim above the Ark of the Covenant, but as the Canaanite bull [I Kings 12:26-33]. These bulls are disparagingly referred to as "calves."

Now to our text. The whole problem centers on a leadership crisis. *Moses delayed to come down from the mountain* and the people assume that he is dead. *They do not know what has become of him.* Without their great teacher, they turn first to *Aaron*, his next of kin, but their request is not for a new teacher or chieftain. The Israelites have so identified YHWH with Moses ("*the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt*") that, with Moses' disappearance, they think YHWH has abandoned them as well. They ask for *gods ... who shall go before us.* The people want something to replace Moses who was their link to YHWH. They will settle for a standard, a visible sign to rally around. Aaron requests the *gold rings*, part of the treasure acquired from the Egyptians [12:35-36]. Each member of the community will thus have some investment in the national religious symbol about to be created.

Exodus 32:4-6

In ancient times temple images were often made of carved wood, overlaid with thin sheets of gold which were hammered onto the wooden core and fixed with small nails. This would be the sense of verse 4's description of Aaron's work: *he took the gold from them, formed it in a mold* (other translations have "fashioned it with a tool"), *and cast an image of a calf.* Another method was to make a rough figure of clay, and then cover it with a thick layer of wax. The wax was sculpted in fine detail. This wax figure was then covered with more clay and baked in an oven. The heat hardened the clay and melted the wax, leaving a hollow space. This hollow could be filled with molten metal. When the metal had cooled, the outer clay was chipped off, leaving a metal image exactly like the wax pattern. This "lost-wax" process would result in a *cast image.*

The people acclaim this artistic endeavor, declaring "*These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!*" In other words, the golden calf is accepted as an appropriate symbol for YHWH. As mentioned before, the calf was designed to represent a throne or pedestal for God.

When Aaron saw this, that is, the enthusiasm of the people for this new religious symbol, *he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to YHWH."* Notice that there is no desire on the part of Israel to reject YHWH and find a new

god. They had no idea that at that very time Moses was receiving God's instructions to build a visible sign of his holy presence. They are impatient and substitute a religion of their own invention. *They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings* (in Hebrew, *olot*) and *brought sacrifices of well-being (shelamim); and the people sat down to eat and drink*: all the rites that will be part of covenant worship. The sin is not in these actions themselves, but in the fact that they are not done in obedience to God.

The last part of the verse indicates another aspect of this "new religion." As we saw in Lesson 18, the offering of sacrifices in Israel was accompanied by sexual abstinence. The rituals of the Canaanites, by contrast, often included intercourse between worshippers and designated courtesans.¹ This was considered consistent with petitions for and celebrations of fertility. It is not surprising that the Canaanite liturgy was more popular than that of Jerusalem. Here, the text notes that after the sacrificial banquets, the people *rose up to revel* (or *to dance*), a polite term for sexual indulgence. Once again, Israel has sinned by doing what the others do, not what is commanded in their unique covenant.

Exodus 32:7-10

Meanwhile, atop Mount Sinai, Moses and God are in conversation. YHWH reveals the sin of Israel *to Moses*, echoing the words of the Israelites in verse 1: *Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely*. YHWH seems to reject the people who have rejected him. Israel indeed is *quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them*. Israel is also described in words that will become all too familiar: *stiff-necked*, unable to bow their heads in worship or in obedience to their master.

We can ponder these verses just as they are written, as an intense discussion between God and Moses. Or one may imagine Moses on the mountain, able to see clearly what the Israelites are up to. Did Moses withdraw from the people temporarily to test their resolve to keep the holy covenant? Is the aged Moses wondering what will happen after his death? Whether by direct revelation from God or by his own observation, Moses is deeply disappointed in his people. His hurt is expressed as a terrible anger, which the story applies to the even more disappointed YHWH: *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*. Both Moses and YHWH are ready to call the whole thing off and start again.

Exodus 32:11-14

When we are hurt or frustrated, when our anger begins to burn and consume us, we are often advised to bring the matter to prayer. The following verses are a beautiful example of Moses as a priestly intercessor: he *implored the LORD his God*.

¹ This practice is also known as temple prostitution. Young women (or young men) were taken into the service of the local god or goddess. A sexual encounter with one of these dedicated persons was considered a sacred act.

We look more closely at Moses' prayer. First, there is a much-needed confrontation with reality. So often our own anger is fueled by an unrealistic expectation or by blowing something all out of proportion. Moses begins to pray, "*O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot...*" or, why is Moses so upset? These Israelites are after all, "*your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?*" Moses recalls a fundamental truth: the Israelites are the people of YHWH, not the people of Moses.

Next Moses reflects on the consequences of his angry response. What would happen if he simply walked away? Worse, what would happen if he would take some violent action? *The Egyptians would 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."* If love of God is not motive enough, sometimes human respect will keep us from doing something we will regret later. Moses prays to God, even as he reminds himself, *turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people.* Moses is undergoing another conversion, a *change of mind.*

The people of Israel are fond of reminding God of his promises as a way of reminding themselves to live by them. Moses regains his balance and perspective by repeating the terms of his ancestral faith: *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 forever.'* What might happen if the next time we were upset and angry, we took a few moments and recited a basic statement of our faith, like the Apostles' Creed or the Lord's Prayer, just to regain our perspective? In the face of all that God has done for us, is this issue of ours really so important?

And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people. Certainly the LORD changed the mind of Moses!

Exodus 32:15-18

After his gracious prayer of intercession, *Moses* has to confront the people. He prepares to call them back to their holy covenant with YHWH. Moses has come face to face with God and with himself. The terms of the covenant are living and life-giving words: *the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets.* Moses carries these tablets, these sacred tokens of his faith-filled encounter with God, with reverence, perhaps hoping to inspire the people by his own example.

Joshua, Moses' assistant, has been waiting below the mountain's peak for Moses' return. He interprets *the noise of the people as they shouted*, as *a noise of war in the camp.* It is actually far worse than a battle with human enemies; Israel is divided against itself and is estranged from God. Moses correctly understands it as the noise of religious celebration, though a

hollow one. *It is not the sound made by victors, or the sound made by losers; it is the sound of revelers that I hear.* The empty praises of idolatrous worship are painful to Moses' ears. The people are deceiving themselves: their shallow joy will soon be revealed as profound bitterness. The worship of the calf will be a scar of shame for the people as long as they live.

Exodus 32:19-20

In a dramatic gesture, the angry Moses *threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.* The holy words are devoid of their meaning if the people have abandoned their faith. With zeal reminiscent of all the religious reformers of Israel, Moses destroys *the calf that they had made* [see 2 Kings 23:1-23 and 1 Maccabees 4:26-59]. Moses then *burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.* The people are forced to “swallow their pride” and “eat their words.” This ritual is called an ordeal, an ancient way of proving guilt or innocence. In Numbers 5:26 the ordeal is a way to convict or acquit a woman suspected of adultery. Here, it is a way of making Israel accept responsibility for their faithlessness, their adultery against Yhwh.

The remainder of this chapter includes Aaron's denial of wrongdoing — the calf simply “came out of the fire” — and Moses' summons to follow the LORD. It was the tribe of Levi that responded to the call: they slay those who had participated in the apostasy. This action proves them worthy of the priesthood.