



LESSON 26

God punishes Israel's idolatry

EXODUS 32:1-35



God responds to idolatry with punishment and mercy.



“The LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people” (Exod 32:14).

Supporting Truths

1. Idolatry is sin.
2. God is a just judge.
3. God is merciful.
4. God hates false worship.
5. A godly leader honors God’s glory and character.

Objectives

1. Describe Israel’s idolatry and explain what else is counted as idolatry.
2. Describe how God punished Israel’s sin.
3. Explain God’s two reasons for being merciful.
4. Consider why God’s wrath against idolatry is fitting.
5. Contrast Moses’ and Aaron’s responses.

STUDY THE BIBLE LESSON

God punishes Israel's idolatry • Exodus 32:1–35



Lesson Summary

God had shown Israel how to worship Him by giving them His law and the plans for the tabernacle. Together, these explained how Israel was to worship God rightly. But only a few weeks after hearing the Ten Commandments, and before Moses could come down the mountain with the plans for the tabernacle, the people turned to idolatry. Their sin led to the death of 3,000 men, but through Moses' intercession, God spared the rest of the people on the basis of His glory and promises.

Spotlight on the Gospel

At the heart of all sin is a refusal to worship God rightly. But thankfully, there is one who intercedes for Christians, Jesus Christ. Just as Moses interceded for Israel and even offered his own life for atonement, so Jesus does for those who have faith in Him. But Jesus, as the Son of God, made atonement acceptable to God. By His death, we receive God's mercy. By His death, God can punish sin and yet forgive the sinner.

LAST WEEK



**God ordains the
tabernacle**
*Exodus 25:1–27:19;
30:1–10*

THIS WEEK



**God punishes Israel's
idolatry**
Exodus 32:1–35

NEXT WEEK



**God's presence fills the
tabernacle**
*Exodus 33:1–34:35;
40:1–38*

DELIVERANCE

Lesson Commentary

God responds to idolatry with punishment and mercy.

When God spoke the Ten Commandments, the people were terrified by His holy presence and asked if God could speak only to Moses (Exod 20:18–19). So Moses went up into the thick cloud where God was, while the people waited at the foot of the mountain (20:21). During these 40 days the people became restless. Though they had seen God’s holy power with their own eyes, they quickly sought an idol to lead them. In response, God proved that He is both just and merciful, punishing sin but sparing His people for the sake of His glory and covenant promises.

Israel committed idolatry (32:1–6)

When Moses did not immediately return from the mountain, the people quickly turned to **idolatry**: they worshiped something else in the place of God. The problem started when they allowed themselves to lose sight of the true God. They forgot that it was God who had led them out of Egypt, and they gave credit for their deliverance to a man, Moses (32:1). Confidence in a man, even a worthy man like Moses, should never replace confidence in God. Men come and go, but God is forever.

It seems that Aaron opposed their plan but lacked the courage to confront them. Perhaps he thought having to tear their gold earrings off would make the people stop, but it did not (32:2–3). So Aaron did what the people wanted and made them a golden calf (32:4). The calf was probably carved out of wood and plated with gold (so that later Moses burned the wood and ground up the gold). Calves were a symbol of strength, commonly worshiped by the Egyptians and Philistines. Aaron foolishly thought he could still turn the Israelites’ worship back to the true God by claiming that the calf was Yahweh. He built an altar in front of the calf and declared a festival to Yahweh (32:5). But the people’s **worship**, the special honor they were supposed to give to God alone, was out of control, proving that they were not serving the true God at all (32:6).

When Israel worshiped the golden calf, they broke the first three commandments. They violated the first commandment, worshiping a god other than the true God. They violated the second commandment because not even the true God was supposed to be worshiped in the form of any image. They violated the

third commandment by applying the name of God to an image that was not God.

Like them, we commit idolatry whenever we claim to worship God but instead worship our own version of God. We also commit idolatry by our greed, whenever we want something more than God Himself (Col 3:5), since we worship whatever controls our desires.

Moses interceded for Israel (32:7–14)

The LORD knew what Israel was doing, and He responded with appropriate wrath. He told Moses that Israel had “corrupted” themselves (Exod 32:7), just like the people before the flood (Gen 6:12). “Corrupted” means rotten and useless, like Jeremiah’s rotten belt (Jer 13:7). So the LORD refused to call Israel “my people” as He had before (Exod 32:7). He called them Moses’ people. They were “stiff-necked,” willing to bow before a cow but unwilling to bow before their LORD (32:9). So the LORD told Moses to “let me alone” in order to destroy Israel completely (32:10). The LORD’s response shows just how terrible idolatry is. Idolatry is sin, and God hates sin (Ps 5:5).

God threatened to destroy the people, even suggesting that He would make a new nation out of Moses, but Moses wisely said no (Exod 32:10–11). Moses had good reason to get rid of these stubborn people who had already complained so often about his leadership. But Moses passed the test; after all, if Moses accepted God’s offer, then he would be agreeing that God’s people should be rejected when they sin. If he agreed to that, then what hope could Moses have when he or his children sinned?

So Moses **interceded**; he prayed for the sake of the people. He declared that Israel was God’s people, not his own (32:11). He appealed to God’s glory (32:12). He appealed

to God’s faithfulness (32:13). So God relented (32:14). The word used here for “relent” usually speaks of God showing compassion and relenting of punishment (cf. Joel 2:13). There is a different word most often used for humans repenting—a word that means “turn”. So it was

THINK ABOUT IT

Wrong thinking about God leads to the wrong worship of God.



THINK ABOUT IT

God’s character should direct both the believer’s prayers and his praise



STUDY THE BIBLE LESSON

God punishes Israel's idolatry • Exodus 32:1–35



not as if Moses had caused God to change His plan. Rather, God had tested Moses, and Moses had prayed according to what God already desired. God is one who shows mercy for the sake of His glory (Isa 48:11) and in order to be faithful to His promises (Deut 7:7–8; Rom 11:28–29). So God was pleased with Moses, and He is pleased with all who pray according to His character and for the sake of His glory (John 14:13).



THINK ABOUT IT

Breaking just one of God's Laws is like hitting a window in one place with a hammer: the whole thing shatters.

Through Moses the LORD severely punished the people's sin (32:15–29)

After God relented, Moses went down to the people. He was carrying the two tablets with the law written on them, but when he saw the idol worship, he threw the tablets

down in anger (32:19). They shattered, illustrating how Israel had broken the commandments they had just heard from the LORD 40 days earlier.

Moses, zealous for God's holiness, put an end to the idolatry. He burned the calf, then he ground up the gold from the calf into powder (32:20). Next he sprinkled the powder into the drinking water and made the people drink. This illustrated the stupidity of worshiping a man-made idol. What they were worshiping as their god one moment became something to drink the next.

Moses then turned to Aaron (32:21), but Aaron refused to take responsibility. Instead, he blamed the people, and just in case that wasn't enough, he claimed that the calf miraculously formed itself (32:22–24). But Aaron was to blame because he had let the people get out of control (32:25). In fact, God would have killed Aaron on the spot if Moses had not prayed for God to spare Him (Deut 9:20).

Finally, to put an end to the riotous idolatry, Moses called to himself whoever was for the LORD (Exod 32:26). Only the Levites came to him. Moses then ordered them to go through the people, killing them with their swords (32:27). Three thousand men were killed (32:28). This sounds harsh, especially since they were killing their own relatives. But it illustrates the severity of sin, especially of

idolatry. We must love God more than anyone or anything, even more than our closest family members (Matt 10:37).

The LORD confirmed both His justice and His mercy (32:30–35)

After the slaughter, Moses returned to the LORD to make atonement for Israel's sin (32:30). Moses pleaded that if God would not forgive Israel, then He should kill Moses instead (32:32). However, Moses could not offer his life for theirs. No mere man can atone for, or ransom, the life of another (Ps 49:7–9).

God rejected Moses' request but answered his heart's desire. God refused to turn away from His **justice**. He would do what is right and fair, promising that those who sinned would die for their own sin (32:33). God may have sent an additional plague (32:35), but this is likely a summary of the punishment already inflicted. Either way, God struck them justly.

On the other hand, God also promised that His angel would go with Moses to lead the people (32:34), showing that God had not forsaken His people. He showed **mercy** by not giving the punishment that was deserved. Although individuals who reject God will perish, God's covenant to the people of Israel, and to all who believe, remains.

Several times the idolatry of Israel is called a great sin (32:21, 30, 31). It was very serious, and it was not limited to the worship of a physical image (Col 3:5). Whenever we desire anyone or anything in the place of God, we provoke God's wrath (Exod 32:10; Col 3:6). We may even commit idolatry while claiming to worship God, if we are actually worshiping our own idea of God. The sin of the calf reminds us that Israel was unable to be holy before God. Thankfully, God is merciful. He would graciously give them a tabernacle, sacrifices, and priest as a way for this sinful people to dwell with God. For us, He has now provided Jesus Christ to forgive and cleanse all who humbly pray for mercy.

THINK ABOUT IT

It is because of God's mercy that man is not instantly consumed by God's wrath.



Lesson Outline

God responds to idolatry with punishment and mercy.

AGES 3–5 LESSON OUTLINE



1. Israel worshiped an idol (32:1–6).
2. Moses prayed for God not to kill all of Israel (32:7–14).
3. God punished Israel by killing 3,000 men (32:15–29).
4. God was kind and did not kill all of Israel (32:14, 30–35).

AGES 6–11 LESSON OUTLINE



1. **Israel sinned by committing idolatry (32:1–6).**
 - After waiting for Moses for 40 days, the people wanted an idol to lead them (32:1).
 - Aaron made a golden calf out of their earrings (32:2–4).
 - Israel sinned and worshiped the golden calf as if it were Yahweh (32:4–6).
2. **Through Moses God chose to show mercy (32:7–14).**
 - The LORD tested Moses by offering to make Moses into His chosen nation (32:7–10).
 - Moses appealed to the LORD's glory (32:11–12).
 - Moses appealed to the LORD's faithfulness to His promise (32:13–14).
 - The LORD relented (32:14).
3. **Through Moses God severely punished the people's sin (32:15–29).**
 - Moses threw down the tablets of the Ten Commandments (32:15–19).
 - Moses ground the calf into powder and made the people drink it in the water (32:20).
 - Aaron refused to take responsibility (32:22–24).
 - Moses led the Levites to kill 3,000 men of Israel (32:25–29).
4. **God confirmed both His justice and His mercy (32:30–35).**
 - Moses prayed that the LORD would forgive their serious sin (32:30–31).
 - Moses prayed that he would die if God would not forgive them (32:32).
 - The LORD said only those who participated in the sin would die (32:33).
 - The LORD promised that His angel would go with Moses to lead Israel (32:34).

TEACH THE BIBLE LESSON

God punishes Israel's idolatry • Exodus 32:1–35



Lesson Questions

Use these questions to teach or to review this week's lesson.



Ages 3–5 Lesson Questions

1. **What sin did the people commit?**
Idolatry. They worshiped a golden calf in place of God.
2. **Did God hate their sin?**
Yes. He even told Moses to let him kill all of Israel.
3. **What did Moses say to God?**
Moses asked God to forgive Israel.
4. **Did God punish Israel?**
Yes. Three thousand men died.



Ages 6–11 Lesson Questions

1. **Why did the people commit idolatry?**
They stopped remembering the true God who had rescued them from Egypt.
2. **What was their idolatry?**
They worshiped a golden calf. Even though they called it Yahweh, it was not Yahweh.
3. **What did God tell Moses to let Him do?**
God told Moses to let Him destroy all of Israel and make a new nation out of Moses instead.
4. **What reasons did Moses give for God to forgive Israel?**
Moses prayed on the basis of God's glory and promises.
5. **What did Moses do with the Ten Commandments when he saw the people's sin?**
He shattered them on the ground in anger. This showed how Israel had broken God's commands.
6. **What did Moses do to the calf?**
He burned it, ground it into powder, and made the people drink it in the water.
7. **What was Israel's punishment?**
3,000 men were killed.
8. **Was God merciful?**
Yes. Even though all Israel deserved to be destroyed, only 3,000 died. God planned to continue bringing Israel to the promised land.

Lesson Activities

Choose from the following ideas to introduce, illustrate, and apply this week's lesson.

AGES 3–5



THE SERIOUSNESS OF SIN

To help communicate the seriousness of sin, review stories that dealt with God's acts of judgment. Talk about when Adam and Eve sinned, and how God expelled them from the garden. There was a time when people were so sinful that God destroyed everyone in a flood. At Babel, God scattered the people and confused their languages because of their pride. God burned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of the people's wickedness.

GOLDEN CALF

Bring a golden calf to class. You could build one using gold foil or bring in a cow stuffed animal or figurine from home. Tell the children that the Israelites disobeyed God's second command when they made an idol and worshiped it, and that we're going to learn more about their sin, and God's punishment and mercy in today's lesson.



WRONG WORSHIP

Use the golden calf (referenced in the above activity) as a visual aid during the lesson. Ask the children if the calf has any power to do anything on its own. Can it move? Can it eat? Can it help others? No. The calf is powerless to do anything. Tell the children that the Israelites broke God's command when they worshiped the calf. Ask the children who we are to worship. Explain that we are only to worship the one, true God.

SERIOUS SIN

Bring a sword to class (real or pretend). Use this during the lesson to illustrate God's punishment of the Israelites. Tell the children that idol worship is a serious sin. Explain that since the Israelites worshiped the calf, God commanded the Levites to go through the camp and kill those who worshiped the idol with their swords (Exod 32:27). That day about 3,000 men died because of their sin. However, God was merciful and not all of the people died (32:14, 30–35). Explain that mercy is not getting the punishment that we deserve.



BROKEN COMMANDMENTS, BROKEN HEART

See Year 1 Craft Book, Book 1.

Materials: Craft sheets, green construction paper, crayons, scissors, and glue.

Directions: Cut out the two templates from the craft sheets. Cut tablets and heart from craft sheet and cut them along the solid lines to separate the pieces. Have the children glue the pieces of the tablets and the pieces of the heart on the proper template. Glue the templates to opposite sides of a sheet of green construction paper.

*Broken Commandments,
Broken Heart
See Year 1 Craft Book, Book 1.*



TEACH THE BIBLE LESSON

God punishes Israel's idolatry • Exodus 32:1–35



AGES 6–8



INTRODUCE

IDLE IDOLS

Show the children pictures of idols from various world religions. Talk about what the idols do and what power they have (do nothing, do not move, could fall over and break, have no power). Then compare all this to the God of the Bible. God created everything, including the materials people use to make idols! We did not make God. He made us! Tell the children that it is a sin to worship idols. Explain that it is also a sin to worship other forms of idols—not just statues, but anything that we put above God (such as money, fame, and beauty).

OBEDIENCE TRIALS

On pieces of paper, write several things you want the children to do. Make the requests simple so they can be done quickly. Place the papers in a basket and let the children pick a paper and do what it says. Talk about the Ten Commandments and how God's Word has things written for the children to obey just as they have obeyed you today. Tell the children that in today's lesson we will see that the Israelites broke the first three of God's commandments when they worshiped the golden calf.



ILLUSTRATE

REACTION CHARADES

Before teaching on the three responses of Moses to Israel's idolatry (32:11–20), ask three children to come up and act out Moses' reactions in front of the class. Have the responses written on index cards to show to each child actor. Allow the class to shout out guesses during the game until someone gives the correct answer.

Three Responses of Moses:

1. Prayed (32:1–14)
2. Broke the tablet containing the Ten Commandments (32:15–19)
3. Burned and ground the golden calf into fine dust (32:20)

PURE WORSHIP

God deserves and demands pure worship. We cannot worship God and idols at the same time. This is what the Israelites attempted to do (32:4–6). Illustrate this by dropping a few drops of food coloring into a glass of water. Just a few drops pollutes the entire glass. Explain that in a similar way even the smallest amount of false worship pollutes any true worship offered with it.



APPLY

RESPONDING TO A MERCIFUL AND GRACIOUS GOD

See Year 1 Craft Book, Book 1.

Materials: Craft sheet, red and white cardstock, red yarn, crayons, scissors, and glue.

Directions: Cut out a heart from a half-sheet of red construction paper. Paste the title on the front of the heart and the reference and verse text on the back. Cut out another, smaller heart from a quarter-sheet of white construction paper. Paste the "Love and Obey Him" text on one side and the Deuteronomy 6:4–5 reference on the back. Punch small holes at the top and bottom of the red heart, and another hole in the top of the smaller white heart. Thread yarn through these, linking them together and providing you with a piece to hang it with from the top.



Responding to a Merciful and Gracious God
See Year 1 Craft Book, Book 1.

AGES 9–11



INTRODUCE

TEN COMMANDMENTS, PART 1

Make two stone tablets out of clay. Allow it to dry so that the clay hardens. Tell the children that in today's lesson the Israelites broke each of the first three commandments when they worshiped the golden calf. Ask the children if they can name any of these commandments.

HOW TO PRAY

Tell the children that in today's lesson we are going to read a prayer of Moses (Exod 32:11–13). Explain that this prayer is a model for us to follow. First, Moses prayed about God's past blessings to His people (brought them out of Egypt). Then Moses made a specific request (do not destroy them). Finally, Moses remembered God's promises that were applicable (Abrahamic Covenant). We can pray in the same way. First, remember God's blessings and thank Him for them. (Dear God, thank you for...) Then make requests. (Tell the children about how God is all-powerful and can do anything. However, He will answer prayer according to His will.) Finally, pray to God about His promises to us in the Bible. (Since God does not lie, if He promises something to us, He will provide it!).



ILLUSTRATE

TEN COMMANDMENTS, PART 2

Use the clay tablets from the activity above for this illustration. For a visual example at the beginning of the lesson, drop the tablets on a table and let them shatter. In today's lesson, Moses shatters the Ten Commandments because of Israel's sin. He did this to illustrate how Israel had broken God's commandments.

GRUMBLING

The Israelites became impatient as they waited for Moses to return from the mountain. Their impatience turned to grumbling. This grumbling weakened Aaron's ability to make wise decisions. He must have been tired of hearing all their complaining, so he finally gave in to them. Ask the children the following questions about grumbling: Do your grumbles and complaints wear down your parents? Do you ever keep whining until they finally give in to your desires? Can these grumbings cause your parents to give in and allow you to make poor choices? What should your response be when your parents take a long time to respond to your questions? Have you ever pushed your parents into a decision that you wanted them to make which turned out to be the wrong choice?



APPLY

RIGHT WORSHIP OF GOD

This week's lesson provides the opportunity to teach the children about true worship. True worship begins with a right view of God. Ask the children some of or all the following questions:

- Is there more than one God? (Deut 6:4)
- Can God lie? (Num 23:19)
- Does God know the future? (Ps 139:1–6, 15–16)
- Does anything happen that God does not know about? (Heb 4:13; 1 John 3:20)
- Is there anything that God cannot do? (Jer 32:17, 27)
- Is God everywhere at the same time? (Ps 139:7–12)
- Does God hear our prayers? (Prov 15:29)
- Does God ever break a promise? (Num 23:19)
- Did God die for us? (Rom 5:8)
- Is God love? (1 John 4:8)
- Is God sinless? (Heb 4:15; 1 John 1:5)
- Is anything more powerful than God? (Jer 32:17, 27)
- Can anyone live independently of God? (John 15:5)
- Does God's love ever change? (Lam 3:22–23)
- Does God get impatient or get angry quickly? (Exod 34:6–7)
- Is God ever unfair? (Dan 4:37)
- Is God totally in control over all people and circumstances? (Ps 33:8–11)
- Will God ever die? (Isa 57:15)
- Is God's Word true? (Ps 19:7–1)