

## Exodus 32 The Golden Calf

### Read Exodus 32:1-14

#### Comment

This is Israel's most famous failure to obey God and exemplifies all their future failures to meet the terms of his covenant with them. God's judgment seems harsh to many but we must remember the "book of the covenant" we just looked at the past two weeks. Israel have said emphatically that they will obey. Yet they violate two commands specifically in the "top 10", #1 and #2 (Ex. 20:3-6). Israel's seems to have grown impatient with Moses 40 days on the mountain with God and erects an idol and engages in a sin-filled party. Aaron shows himself to be an incompetent priest as well. The basic issue is they are trying to worship God on their terms, not on his, and with respect to what he said was a fitting and proper way to worship him.

Naturally, people will ask whether God changes his mind in response to Moses' intercession in vv. 10-14. But we must view this whole episode within the broader narrative of the second half of Exodus to answer this question well. First, Israel has entered into a covenant with God. Second, God has always been working to be present with his people, undoing the damage that began in the garden. Third, God's holiness cannot be compromised and sin and evil will be consumed by his presence. The people must be atoned so he may be present among them (Ex. 24:8-11). Fourth, God mediates his presence through chosen representatives, at this time Moses. In just a few more chapters, God's glory will pass before Moses and the tabernacle construction will begin before his glory fills the tabernacle and the mission continues. We know from the story God doesn't destroy Israel, he does come to be present with them, and this was always the plan. The whole narrative points away from a simplistic reading of this passage.

It would seem then in light of the whole thrust of the narrative that God is inviting Moses to really own his mediatorial role. Verse 10 points to this when God says, "Let me alone..." As if to say, "convince me why I shouldn't." Consider Moses rationale that points to God's character, his reputation, and his covenant promises. This text is a good example of God communicating something important about himself and accommodating our limited human understanding through a story. Indeed scripture does not use the normal word for "repent" for God (shuv, or "to turn") but uses a word expressing deep emotion, "regret" for God (nahum). It points to both God's abundant mercy and also (if you read the whole chapter) that he will not let the guilty go unpunished. Something that is made very clear in just a few chapters later in Exodus 34:6-7.

If you wanted to examine another passage that seems to show God changing his mind, and also affirming he does not change his mind see 1 Samuel 15 and note especially verses 15:11 and 15:29. Other notable passages about God "regretting" are Gen 6:6-7; Ex 32:14; Jud 2:18; 1 Sam 15:11; 1 Chr 21:15; Jer 18:8; 26:3, 19; Amos 7:3, 6; Jon 3:10. These should be read in conjunction with the other passages affirming God does not change Mal 3:6; Jas 1:17; Ps 102:26-28; Nu 23:19; Ro 1:23; Heb 13:8; Ex 3:14; Nu 23:20; 1 Sa 15:29; Heb 1:11-12; Heb 6:17-18.

## Questions

1. Why is Israel's worship of the golden calf so striking? What does that tell us about how easily we construct idols?
2. What role do you think Aaron plays in this? Should he have known better (cf. vv. 21-24)?
3. The Lord shows obvious anger at Israel's disobedience. What is being revealed about his heart in this passage? How is God's response similar to how we may react at a great betrayal and how is it different?
4. Look closely at Moses response to God's anger in verses 11-13. What is the basis of Moses appeal? What does this teach us about prayer and intercession?
5. People often struggle with the point of prayer if God knows everything or they pray fervently as if it all depends on the intensity of their prayer. Regardless of how one tries to solve this dilemma, the Bible clearly affirms God's unchanging character and that our prayers matter. How does this Biblical tension guard us from thinking prayer is pointless to everything depends on our prayers? What is the danger of each?
6. What has your own journey of prayer with God has been like? How may he be inviting you to grow in prayer?