

IN TROUBLE WITH A GOLDEN CALF

by Dave Shirk

KEY VERSE:

“But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written.” Exodus 32:32 NRSV

FAITH STORY:

Exodus 32:1-35

FAITH FOCUS:

Moses had been up on Mt. Sinai (Horeb) meeting with God for many days. Clouds surrounded the mountain, lightning flashed, thunder rumbled, and the ground shook. All these signs indicated the presence of God on the mountain, but somehow that was not enough for the Israelites. They became restless and demanded that Aaron, Moses' own brother, make an idol for them. Aaron made a golden calf and the people worshiped it. God saw what the people were doing and was going to destroy them all, and start over with Moses and his descendants. But Moses interceded on behalf of the people and God relented. Moses then came down the mountain with the tablets of stone on which the Words of God were written. When he saw what the people were doing, in his anger he threw the stone tablets down to the ground, breaking them. He then burned the golden calf and had about three thousand of the ring leaders killed. Moses went back up the mountain to God and pleaded with God on behalf of the people, offering to take the punishment for the people. God relented and only sent a plague on the people to punish the ones who had sinned against him.

SESSION GOAL:

To help students understand that intercession and prayer make a difference.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of the session students should be able to identify several persons they know who need someone to intercede for them, and agree to pray on their behalf.

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

Bibles, paper, 3 x 5 cards, pens or pencils, chalk or dry board; an inviting snack table with goodies, napkins and plates for serving.

Before the students enter the room, set up a refreshment table with food and drinks (fresh fruit, donuts, brownies, hot chocolate, juice, soft drinks—whatever you know students like. Be aware of dietary needs of students and provide something that everyone can eat.) Place two signs on the table, one saying “Promise Table, Refreshments for Class” and the other saying “You’ll get instructions later about when you can have them.” Make this display as inviting and tempting as possible.

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (10 minutes)

Welcome students to class but do not make any mention of the refreshment table. If students ask, refer them to the sign that says instructions will be given later. Ask students to share one interesting thing that happened to them last week, or a prayer request for themselves or someone they know. Close the time of sharing with prayer. Tell students that you must leave the room for just a moment and you will be right back. Leave the room for five minutes.

CONNECT: (5–7 minutes)

Upon your return, invite the students to have some refreshments. While they are enjoying the snacks, ask them to share their feelings or thoughts about waiting for the food. Did they think you were gone too long? Did they want to take the refreshments before you returned? Did anyone take something while you were gone?

Say: *The Israelites had been brought out of slavery and promised a new, special land, but they were in the desert waiting for further instructions, like you were waiting for the snacks. Let's look at the impatience of the Israelites and what happened when they got tired of waiting.*

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (15–20 minutes)

Read Exodus 32. You can assign a narrator, people, Moses, Aaron, and God, and read the passage as a skit or have each student read a verse or two at a time, until the story is completed. Continue with one or both of the following options:

Option A: Ask students to choose one of the following.

- 1 Imagine you are one of the Israelites. Write a letter to God asking any questions or making any comments you have while you are waiting for Moses to return from the mountain.
- 2 Imagine you are God, and write a letter to the people after they worshipped the calf and made it their god.

Imagine you are Moses and write a letter to God, pleading on behalf of the Israelites.

Option B: Divide the class into groups of 2-3 and have the groups summarize the following:

- 1 verses 1-6—the people's feelings
- 2 verses 1-6, 21-24—Aaron's role
- 3 verses 7-10—God's anger
- 4 verses 9-14, Moses' first intercession for the people
- 5 verses 30-35, Moses' second intercession

Discuss the summaries as a class.

Draw attention to Moses' intercessions.

Say something like: *The people had sinned against God and were punished for it, but they were not destroyed as God originally intended to do to them. Why? What did Moses do or say that made God change his mind? (v. 11-14, Remember your promise.) What did Moses ask God to do in his second intercession? (v. 31-32a, Forgive their sin.)*

What did Moses offer, if God could not forgive the people's sins? (v. 32b, Blot out my name instead.) How was Moses acting like Jesus? (Offering himself as substitute)

APPLY: (10 minutes)

Say: *Moses interceded on behalf of the Israelites, and it made a difference in what happened to them. Do you think prayer really makes a difference? Discuss. Who do you think intercedes for you? On the chalk or dry board, make a list of people students name who might be interceding for them. Then make a second list of people the students are or could be interceding for.*

RESPOND: (10 minutes)

Ask students to take a minute or two of silence and think of some people who need someone to intercede (pray) for them. Pass out 3 x 5 cards and pencils or pens and ask the students to write down the names of those persons, then give them a few minutes to intercede to God on those persons' behalf. End the session with a closing prayer—and remember to pray for each student.

Ask the students to take the cards home and pray for the people on the card each day of the following week.

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

Three months after the Israelites left Egypt, they arrived at Mt. Sinai, in the Sinai Wilderness. God spoke with Moses on the mountain, and when he went down, he sanctified the people and they washed their clothes. Three days later they left camp and went to the foot of the mountain, where they trembled at the awesome signs of God's descent to the earth. The mountain was covered in a thick cloud with lightning, thunder, and loud trumpet blasts. Moses briefly met with God on the mountain, and then came down to give them the Ten Commandments. The people were so afraid that they asked Moses to speak to God for them so that they wouldn't have to hear God's voice, lest they die. (Exodus 19 & 20) Moses went to receive more instructions from God for the people. When he returned, he told them what God had told him. The people all agreed that they would do all that the Lord said. They offered burnt sacrifices and Moses sprinkled blood on the altar and on the people as a sign of the covenant that God was making with them. Moses and many of the elders of Israel went close and actually saw some kind of manifestation of God and had a feast. Moses and Joshua, his assistant, left the people because God called Moses up into the mountain once again. Moses was on the mountain for forty days receiving more instructions and the two tablets of stone with the writings of God. For that entire time the signs of God on Mt. Sinai were visible to the people. (Exodus 21- 31) The people became restless and impatient when there was such a long delay in Moses coming back to them. The people demanded that Aaron make a god that they could see, so Aaron collected their golden jewelry and melted it down to make a calf, which would have been similar to what they had seen in Egypt. It may have been hard for the people to understand the concept of having only one God, because the Egyptians had many gods. They worshipped the golden calf and had a celebration. God told Moses to go down and see the evil that the people were doing and that He was going to destroy them and make a new nation out of Moses' descendants. Moses pleaded with God on the people's

behalf. His plea was reminding God that the other countries would see God's destruction of his own people and also reminding him of his covenant with Abraham. God relented, and sent Moses down to deal with the people. When Moses saw what was happening he became so angry he threw the stone tablets that God had given him to the ground, breaking them. He burned the calf and ground it to powder, which he mixed with water and made the people drink. He asked any who were on the Lord's side to come forward. When all the descendants of Levi came to him, they were instructed to go and kill any who were engaged in evil. They killed about three thousand men of Israel that day. Moses went back and pleaded again to God on the people's behalf. God again relented, but he plagued the people because of what they had done. The Bible is not clear whether this was what had been done already or if this was to be future punishment. (Exodus 32) God told Moses to go and lead the people on to the Promised Land, with an angel in attendance, instead of God, since he was still angry. This made the people mourn and they removed their jewelry. Moses moved his tent outside the camp, where it now became the tent of meeting for any that sought the Lord. Moses asked God to promise his presence for the rest of their journey and God answered by passing by Moses as he was in the cleft of the rock. (Exodus 33)