

## Israel's Sin and Restoration

**Lesson Scope:** [Exodus 32-34](#)

*References in brackets refer to Lesson Scope unless noted otherwise*

### Lesson Focus

Near Mount Sinai the children of Israel had witnessed an awesome display of God's power. Thunder and lightning, fire, smoke, and earthquake had accompanied the Lord's presence upon the mount. These visible signs of God's majesty and holiness had caused Israel to fear and tremble. Even Moses said, "I exceedingly fear and quake" (Hebrews 12:21).

Now, a mere forty days after having made an audible commitment to obey the commandment of the Lord (Exodus 19:8), Israel had lapsed into idolatry, breaking the first of the Ten Commandments. How deceitful the human heart is! God Himself declared, "They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them" (Exodus 32:8).

Not all of Israel, however, had corrupted themselves with false worship. At this crisis the tribe of Levi stood faithfully on the Lord's side. They became God's tool for judging sin by judgment.

Endeavor to make this lesson practical to God's people today by discussing the threats to true worship that we face. The path of departure from God is marked by deviations in worship. Let us beware of worship that makes room for the flesh. Some areas of danger we face are an overemphasis on humor or the use of sensational stories and illustrations for the purpose of entertainment. Too much variation in the pattern of our worship services may also be an effort to please the restless nature of our flesh. Emphasize to the class that satisfaction with the time-proven patterns of godly worship will help to fortify us against the inroads of false worship.

Worship that pleases the Lord will exalt Him, and give due praise and reverence to His name. If our worship service focuses merely on the excellent speaking or singing ability of men, man receives the glory that God alone deserves. Let us purpose anew to "serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Hebrews 12:28). God has established the

pattern for acceptable worship. When men deviate from that pattern, they are rejecting God and will incur His wrath.

**Lesson Aim:** To show the nature of false worship and God's attitude toward such worship.

**Theme Verses:** [Psalm 106:19-20](#) They made a calf in Horeb, and worshipped the molten image. Thus they changed their glory into the similitude of an ox that eateth grass.

## Lesson Text

### Corruption and Retribution

[Exodus 32:1](#) When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, “Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”

[Exodus 32:7-10](#) And the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. <sup>8</sup> They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” <sup>9</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. <sup>10</sup> Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.”

[Exodus 32:26-28](#) Then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, “Who is on the LORD’s side? Come to me.” And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. <sup>27</sup> And he said to them, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel, ‘Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.’” <sup>28</sup> And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell.

### Intercession and Restoration

[Exodus 32:30-35](#) The next day Moses said to the people, “You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can

make atonement for your sin.”<sup>31</sup> So Moses returned to the LORD and said, “Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold.<sup>32</sup> But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.”<sup>33</sup> But the LORD said to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book.<sup>34</sup> But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them.”<sup>35</sup> Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made.

**Exodus 33:4** When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments.

**Exodus 33:7-10** Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp.<sup>8</sup> Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent.<sup>9</sup> When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses.<sup>10</sup> And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door.

## **Questions for Study**

### **Corruption and Retribution**

1. What factors contributed to Israel's lapse into idolatry?
2. What led to Israel's distorted reasoning as seen in 32:8?
3. What makes false worship appealing to the natural man?
4. What are the tragic results of false worship?

### **Intercession and Restoration**

5. Explain the importance of Moses' response to Israel's sin.
6. How was God merciful to Israel in the midst of judgment?
7. Why did Moses pitch the tabernacle outside the camp?
8. What are the steps necessary for a return to true worship?

## **Analyzing the Passage**

The worship of the golden calf was probably borrowed from Egyptian bull worship. In later years this same image became an object of idolatry to the ten tribes of Israel (1 Kings 12:28). What an obnoxious mixture! Calf worship was merged with a feast to the Lord (32:5).

The word stiffnecked is a figure of speech referring to the obstinacy of an ox or a horse that refuses to be turned with bit or bridle. This aptly describes the natural man's stubborn and rebellious nature.

Observe the heart of Moses as he interceded for God's people. His yearning for the spiritual welfare of Israel was similar to that of the apostle Paul, many centuries later (Romans 9:1-5). Moses' intercession foreshadows the work of our Lord Jesus.

The tabernacle outside the camp may have been Moses' personal tent. It apparently served as an interim meeting place with God. The larger, more permanent tabernacle of the congregation was not set up until several months later (40:2).

"All the people ... worshipped, every man in his tent door" seems to indicate a full restoration of Israel's worship before the Lord (33:10).

## **Principles and Applications**

### **Corruption and Retribution**

1. Dissatisfaction with God's way is a seedbed for false worship (32:1). A casual approach to worship that focuses on more exciting, entertaining methods is often a reaction against the traditional, God-approved way of worship. We should never become dissatisfied with simple Bible teaching and preaching and congregational singing. Meaningful worship guards against an attraction to false forms of worship.

2. Fallen men are prone to worship the gods of this world (32:1). The attempt of sinful man to bring God down on his own level indicates a desire to worship what he can see and feel. The use of tangible objects and sensual music to induce worship is idolatry. True worship is "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23-24). The material world must recede in order for man to commune with God.

3. God views false worship as a corruption, and it incurs His wrath (32:7-10). Worship practices that gratify the fleshly impulses of man are obnoxious to God. Even following a proper form of worship hypocritically is an abomination to God (Isaiah 1:11-15). False worship robs

God of His rightful glory. No matter how pious false worship may appear to man, it stirs God's righteous wrath.

4. Perverted thinking and reasoning lead to false worship (32:7-10). To think that a molten calf had power to bring Israel out of Egypt was absurd. But men today pervert the clear teaching of God's Word on the Creation, on God's plan for marriage, on holiness of life, and on many other Bible teachings. False beliefs lead to false patterns of worship and darkened hearts (Romans 1:21-23).

5. God seeks for those who loyally stand on His side (32:26). We are called to come out from the world's system, patterns of thinking, and worship. We should not be ashamed to be identified as the plain people who have simple houses of worship, Bible-centered preaching, and unadorned personal appearance.

6. Those who worship false gods face the certainty of God's judgment (32:26-28, 35). Today, God in mercy gives people the opportunity to repent from false worship. But someday, all men who worship any object or place any pursuit above their affection for God will stand before God condemned. We do well to heed the warning "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

### **Intercession and Restoration**

7. God's mercy and forgiveness temper His judgment (32:30-33). The prophet Habakkuk acknowledged this truth when he besought the Lord: "In wrath remember mercy" (Habakkuk 3:2). Outside of God's mercy and forgiveness, all men would be condemned to destruction, for all have sinned. Through Christ's intercession and atoning work on Calvary, we receive mercy and pardon from God when we turn to Him.

8. Sorrow for sin precedes restoration (33:4). God, in His goodness, sends conviction of sin to lead us to repentance. Contrition and brokenness before God, because of our consciousness of the awful weight of our sin, is the first step back to God. He has promised to receive the truly repentant.

9. A sincere turning to God for direction leads to full restoration (33:7-10). Israelites who sought the Lord found Him "without the camp." True worship requires a separation from sin and a willingness to identify with God and His people (Hebrews 13:13). When we seek the face of the Lord in true repentance and sincere worship, He responds in fellowship that brings peace and rest to our hearts.

## **Important Teachings**

1. Dissatisfaction with God's way is a seedbed for false worship (32:1).
2. Fallen men are prone to worship the gods of this world (32:1).
3. God views false worship as a corruption, and it incurs His wrath (32:7-10).
4. Perverted thinking and reasoning lead to false worship (32:7-10).
5. God seeks for those who loyally stand on His side (32:26).
6. Those who worship false gods face the certainty of God's judgment (32:26-28, 35).
7. God's mercy and forgiveness temper His judgment (32:30-33).
8. Sorrow for sin precedes restoration (33:4).
9. A sincere turning to God for direction leads to full restoration (33:7-10).
11. False worship separates man from God (33:7-10).

## **Answers to Questions**

I. What factors contributed to Israel's lapse into idolatry?

Aaron's failure in leadership while Moses was absent was no doubt a contributing factor.

Those who left Egypt without true commitment to God had a detrimental influence on the rest of Israel. (Note the influence of the "mixt multitude" in Numbers 11:4).

Israel's lapse into idolatry was preceded by dissatisfaction for God's plan and leading.

Many in Israel did not have a true, reverential fear of God.

2. What led to Israel's distorted reasoning as seen in 32:8?

When Israel turned from true faith in and worship of God to human reasoning, their thinking patterns changed. They began to interpret the reason for their past deliverance by their own faulty reasoning. Their understanding became "darkened" by sin (see Romans 1:21-23).

3. What makes false worship appealing to the natural man?

False worship is a sensual worship, appealing to the senses. False worship involves the tangible, whereas true worship is "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23-24). True worship requires faith and surrender to God, while false worship leaves man in control of his god until it destroys him. False worship makes room for the flesh and its carnal appetites, while true worship involves sacrifice and self-denial.

4. What are the tragic results of false worship?

False worship leads man away from God and holiness of life. It distorts a person's concept of God by replacing reverential fear of God with a casual, tolerant relationship. False worship deceives the disobedient and rebellious into thinking they are acceptable to God. False worship finally leads to the judgment of God.

5. Explain the importance of Moses' response to Israel's sin.

Moses sought to show Israel the seriousness of their sin. He cast the tables of stone at the foot of the mountain, signifying the commandments they had already broken. Moses directed the Levites to execute three thousand of the idolaters, probably purging out the ringleaders in Israel's false worship. Without Moses' intercession for Israel, the people would have perished through God's judgment upon sin.

6. How was God merciful to Israel in the midst of judgment?

God had every right to destroy a sinful people. He brought judgment on three thousand men through the loyalty of the sons of Levi. Israel also suffered from a plague sent by God. Yet God spared many of those who sinned, giving them opportunity to repent and be restored to true worship.

7. Why did Moses pitch the tabernacle outside the camp?

There had been sin in the camp. God's presence could not dwell in the midst of a sinful people. Those who truly sought the Lord needed to separate themselves from sin and its influence by coming outside the camp. Going outside the camp to worship was a mark of repentance, humility, and identity (Hebrews 13:13).

8. What are the steps necessary for a return to true worship?

There must be a consciousness of the serious nature of false worship; it is sin against a holy God. Brokenness and repentance must follow conviction of sin. Those who truly seek the Lord must separate themselves from sin and its contamination. There must be faith and surrender to God, accompanied by reverence and godly fear.

### **Summarizing the Lesson**

The record of Israel's failure in worship is a warning for God's people today (1 Corinthians 10:6-11). Our fallen nature tempts us to drift in the direction of whatever pleases the flesh. However, true worship is always on God's terms and according to His pattern. "He hath sheaved

thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah 6:8).

### **Research Guide**

1. Use a Bible dictionary to trace the origin and work of the Levites.
2. Study the work of intercessors in the Scriptures. Note that Moses' intercession before God for Israel was not a contest of wills with God. Rather, Moses' heart of compassion for God's people mirrors the very heart of God Himself. God sought for a true intercessor for His people and found such a one in Moses.
3. Meditate on God's attitude toward idolatry in Psalm 115:1-8; Isaiah 40:18-21; and Jeremiah 10:1-16.