

5 THROUGH THE WILDERNESS

Brian was numb as he heard the judge's voice. The charge was possession of an illegal substance. The verdict was guilty. The sentence was an intensive drug rehabilitation program. Brian had hit bottom and knew he needed help.

After four weeks in the program, the drug counselors had helped him through the pain and struggle of getting free from the slavery and addiction to the chemical. For the first time in a long while Brian felt he was getting control over his own life again.

Brian's counselors told him it was important to direct his new freedom into something positive. Otherwise, the temptation to slide back into drug abuse and the same old crowd would return. Brian decided to volunteer to work with a church group who helped disadvantaged young people in a poor neighborhood. He got to know and love the young people who looked up to him as a big brother. At last, he was beginning to feel freed from his old life of slavery to drugs. But even better, he felt fulfilled inside as he used his freedom for helping others.

3 STATEMENTS

- The freedom God gives is a freedom to worship God and love our neighbor.
- Worshiping the golden calf continues today in people's worship of money, power, and pleasure.
- In spite of our many failures, God keeps coming back to forgive us.

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Source

FREEDOM JOURNEY

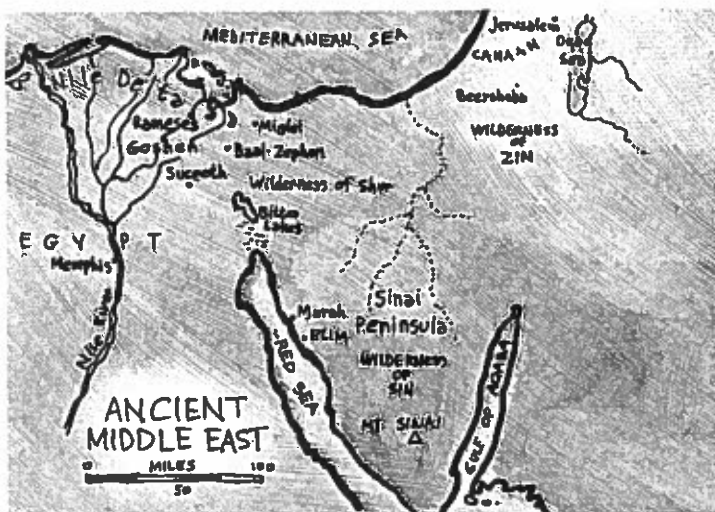
Moses cried, "Let my people go!" God sent the tenth and most terrible plague—the death of the firstborn. In grief over the loss of his own son, Pharaoh let the people of Israel go. God's people left behind their bonds of slavery, but their problems were not over. Before them lay a vast and sometimes hostile wilderness.

On a map of Egypt and the Sinai peninsula, locate the places named in each of the following verses in the book of Exodus. When you have located them, draw a line on the map to represent the path followed by Moses and the people.

12:37; 14:1-2; 15:22; 15:23; 16:1; 19:1

1. Using the map scale, how far did the people travel?

2. How long do you think it would take to move many thousands of people and animals that far?



FREEDOM "FROM" MEANS FREEDOM "FOR"

God freed the Israelites *from* slavery under Pharaoh in Egypt. But being freed *from* something is not enough. Like Brian, we also need to be freed *for* living a new life with a purpose. We need to see that our lives of freedom from an old slavery are good *for* something; otherwise we will just go back to being slaves to our old habits.

God freed the Israelites from slavery in order to bring them to the promised land of Canaan. But that was a long way off. In order to get to the promised land, the people would have to travel through a large and harsh desert wilderness. On that wilderness journey, the people would be challenged to use their freedom for something positive. They would have to learn to depend on God for their daily needs of food and water. They would need to work and live

together as a community. They would have to learn God's will and purpose for them. They would learn to willingly serve others in love rather than be forced to serve Pharaoh in hatred.

The temptation to slide back has always been present for God's people. For the Israelites it was hard to leave the old life behind, even if it was a miserable life of slavery. Read Exodus 16:1-4, 11-15.

1. What did the people complain about immediately after being freed from slavery?

2. What did God do in response to their complaint?

FREEDOM FOR WORSHIPING GOD

What is worship? What happens in worship? Why do we do it? Think about these questions. Then complete this definition.

● "Worship is

Now read Exodus 19:1-9. This was one of the first acts of worship that God's people did after the exodus out of Egypt. The people went out and camped in the presence of God.

● Based on these verses, what elements of worship would you add to your definition above?

This scene of worship happened on Mount Sinai. It was the mountain in the wilderness where God gave Moses and the people the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments show us the central purpose for which God freed us. *The freedom God gives is a freedom to worship God and love our neighbor.*



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The introduction to the Ten Commandments told the people what God had done for them. "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). The first three Commandments told the people how to respond to what God had done. These Commandments told them what was expected in their relationship to God. The last seven Commandments concern people's relationships with others.

Read Exodus 20:1-11. Restate the meaning of each of the first three Commandments in your own words.

1) First Commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3).

2) Second Commandment: "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God" (Exodus 20:7).

3) Third Commandment: "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8).

FREEDOM FOR SHOWING LOVE TO OTHERS

The wilderness was a place for God's people to learn how to use their freedom in constructive ways. They worshiped God. Equally as important was the need to learn how to love and honor other human beings. The last seven Commandments show what is expected in our relationship to others.

Read Exodus 20:12-17. Play the game "Commandments Charades" by randomly acting out one of the last seven Commandments. The others in the class will try to guess which Commandment is being acted out. This game is played without speaking. You may use only actions.

Shaping life

SLIPPING BACK INTO ANOTHER SLAVERY

Moses was on top of Mount Sinai getting the Ten Commandments from God. The people of Israel became impatient and began to forget the freedom God had won for them.

1. Read Exodus 32:1-6. What did the people ask Aaron the priest to do?

It is probably true that no one you know today actually bows down to a statue of a golden calf or other statue idol. Yet many people worship or value as most important the kinds of things the golden calf represents. *Worshiping the golden calf continues today in people's worship of money, power, and pleasure.* They see these things as the most important things in their lives.

2. What other "golden calves" do people continue to worship or remain committed to in our society or world?



Head of bull idol

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3. Read Exodus 32:21-23. Moses came down from the mountain and confronted Aaron about what had happened. Whom did Aaron blame for what happened?

4. Read Exodus 32:24. How did Aaron's story of what happened differ from what actually happened according to Exodus 32:4?

Moses pleaded with God to forgive the people who worshiped the golden calf. Moses told God that he wanted to die with the people if God punished them all with death.

5. How would you describe Aaron's behavior in comparison to the behavior of Moses? Place an X next to one or more of the following statements that you think applies best.

- a. Moses was unwise in risking his life for the people. Aaron wisely tried to cover up his actions and put the blame on someone else.
- b. Moses tried to be a great hero and didn't really mean what he said to God. Aaron just did what any normal human being would do.

Worshiping the golden calf continues today in people's worship of money, power, and pleasure.

- c. Moses' willingness to give up his life for the people showed great love for the people. Aaron's attempt to shift the blame from himself to the people showed selfishness and lack of concern for the people.
- d. Moses wanted and asked for God's love and forgiveness. Aaron needed God's love and forgiveness but did not ask for it.

Imagine that the four characters described below are like Aaron. What would each say when confronted with the sin of having worshiped something other than the true God? How might they try to shift the blame from themselves to someone else? Imagine that Moses pointed a finger at each one and said, "You are guilty of worshiping a golden calf!" How might each respond?

- A woman who worships money and luxury, looking down on people who are not as rich as she is.
- A man who worships his physical power and ability to win and be number one by force.
- A man who worships the good feelings and escape he gets with drugs.
- A woman who worships the members of a rock and roll band.

A MERCIFUL AND GRACIOUS GOD

When the Israelites worshiped the golden calf instead of God, they broke the First and most important Commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). They broke the covenant or relationship between God and them. But Moses pleaded for their forgiveness. Moses begged God to continue to go with them in the wilderness toward the promised land. God finally agreed to go with the Israelites. God knew that they would not change. The people would continue to sin and rebel. What changed was that God's deep character was revealed to Moses. It was God's own decision that made God's continued guidance and presence with the people possible.

- Read Exodus 34:6-7. In the word find, circle the words that are used in this passage to describe God (faithfulness, love, forgiving, merciful, gracious, slow to anger).

In spite of our many failures, God keeps coming back to forgive us.

M J Z R E G N A O T W O L S O
 F H J W P H W C J B U O B H O
 V D H V J L T D O W C O E S L
 B X R X D Y K E J H E N S U Y
 A K W O R K C A E V U E Q B N
 B D Y Y L E U E N H N H R W Z
 R K E L U Q I A L L H D S E I
 H Q C Q T K C U U W Q N L B E
 W V P G L M F F B T W L W L M
 H S O O O I H G V I O O C V M
 Y K Z S C T S G P V U I J G I
 D D E R I A H O E B X N I E O
 D S E A T U A S T D L J Y V C
 R M F F E N Q C J E B Q H O P
 H F O R G I V I N G X G G L A
 X X C G R A C I O U S D C U O

These words about God remind us, during our own journeys through the wilderness and in our times of rebellion against God, that God remains anxious to forgive and to restore broken relationships with us. Deep down, God is a God of love and forgiveness. *In spite of our many failures, God keeps coming back to forgive us.*

Sinai wilderness

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FURTHER

opportunities

Bible Reading

Select one or more passages from the list below. After reading it, summarize its main point. Tell how it relates to this session. List one or two thoughts you had as you read the passage.

- Exodus 33:17-23
- Exodus 32:11-14
- Matthew 22:34-39
- Ephesians 2:8-9
- Psalm 145:1-9

Memory

Memorize Exodus 34:6-7. This is one of the most important and frequent descriptions of God in the Old Testament. This description appears again and again throughout the Scriptures.

Activity 1

Locate stories and advertisements in magazines and newspapers that report on "golden calves" people

may be tempted to believe are more important than anything else in their lives. Remember that the golden calf represents those things by which humans seek money, power, or pleasure as their number one concern.

Cut out the pictures or stories. Use a large piece of tagboard and cut out an outline of a calf or bull with horns. Paste the stories and pictures on the image of the bull. Share your poster with the class.

Activity 2

During the week take note of the ways in which you worship God and show love or concern to others. For worship, include grace at meals, prayers, church worship, singing, or just talking with God. For love to others, consider how you relate to family members, friends, classmates, and others.

Activity 3

Have a family discussion on "golden calves." How may the desire for power, money, or possessions be affecting your family?

FOCUS



ON THE GOLDEN CALF

Did people really worship idols shaped like golden calves in Old Testament times? The answer is yes. Scholars called archaeologists have uncovered ancient cities in the area in and around Israel. They have discovered idols used in religious worship that are shaped like calves or bulls. They also have discovered religious literature that refers to the worship of calves as symbols of power and fertility.

The temptation to worship the golden calf as a god was present not only outside of Israel but also within Israel. Jeroboam, king of northern Israel, built two golden calves at two worship sites in Dan and Bethel. He proclaimed them to be the gods that had led Israel out of Egypt. King Jeroboam sought to lure people away from the true worship of God at the Temple in Jerusalem. He hoped people would be more willing to worship his golden calves. Thus, he would gain more power and money for his own use as king. (See 1 Kings 12:25-33.)