

## group Bible Study – November 14, 2007

### Read Exodus Chapters 32:1-35:3

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Last week our reading assignment had us going all the way from Exodus 25 to Exodus 40. Good job if you read that whole section! This week we're narrowing our focus to one particular story within that big chunk: the story of the golden calf, God's anger with Israel, and ultimately God's forgiveness and restoration.

Last week we read all the incredible detail surrounding the construction of the tabernacle—the elaborate “tent of meeting” that God told the Israelites to build. This tent moved with them as they wandered through the desert, and it was here that God met with the people. We learned that God likes rituals. God gave the people a whole calendar of rituals to follow, because God knows that human beings are shaped by what we do—especially the habits we form over time. We're commanded to celebrate certain festivals every single year, because when we do that we are reminded of who God is and who we really are. God also initiated a whole series of rituals for the Israelites to perform related to this new tabernacle: sacrifices, incense, ritual washing, etc. All of this so that the people would never forget what God had done and who they were.

With this as our background, we read Exodus 32-34 and we see that something goes terribly wrong. Moses goes up the mountain to meet with God, and he doesn't come back for a really long time. The people freak out. They're lost. They don't know how to find a connection to the God who delivered them (Moses had been their connection). So they panic and they ask Aaron to create a statue of a calf, made of gold. And they say: “Here, Israel, is the God who rescued you from Egypt!” They dance and sing, and Aaron declares that this is a festival for the LORD.

They lost faith, and they made an image of God to comfort them. But this was a terrible mistake. God had given the people many images and rituals and festivals so that they would not forget—but the one thing they were not allowed to do was make an image of **God**. God is too big to be imagined in this way. Tapestries and altars and tents and bowls and lamps and the Ark of the Covenant—these were approved images. But these weren't images of God—they were places for God to dwell, and they were reminders of what God had done.

This was no minor offense. God saw what the people had done, and immediately said to Moses, “leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may *destroy* them!”

#### Questions:

- 1) One of the most intriguing parts of this story is the conversation between God and Moses. What does Moses do when God declares that the Israelites will be destroyed? How does God respond to Moses? What does this conversation tell us about the relationship between God and humans?
- 2) In chapter 34, God describes a list of rituals that the people are to observe. Think about each one—what is the purpose of this ritual for this people? What is this designed to teach them? How would practicing this ritual gradually change a person over time?
- 3) Carefully study God's instructions regarding Sabbath in the first part of chapter 35. This particular ritual was given such a high value by God that the punishment for not obeying was death. Why? What does the practice of this kind of Sabbath teach a person and a community over time? Does this have any relevance for us today?