

The Golden Calf

Sunday Plan

SCRIPTURE

Exodus 32

MEMORY VERSE

Exodus 20:3

OPTIONAL VIDEO

The Golden Calf

<https://southside.cc/805-811>

God alone gets first place.

For the Teacher

Read this before you teach. Two weeks ago the kids heard God give the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. The very first commandment was “no other gods.” Today’s story is what happens forty days later — God’s people break that commandment first. They hear God speak, they say they’ll obey, and almost immediately they build something else to worship. The kids should leave with one idea firmly in place.

KEY TRUTH

God alone gets first place.

What “idolatry” actually means. The kids will hear the word “idol” and picture a statue. Statues are the easy version. The harder version is anything that takes the place God should have — your time, your attention, your trust, your love. The golden calf in Exodus 32 is a gold statue, but the lesson isn’t “don’t worship metal cows.” The lesson is “don’t give God’s spot to anything else.” Keep that broader definition on the table all morning.

The timing makes it worse. Exodus 32 happens while Moses is on the mountain receiving the rest of God’s instructions. The people have heard God speak in thunder. They have agreed, out loud, to keep his commandments. Forty days later they are dancing in front of a gold statue. The speed of it is the point — not “people sometimes fail” but “even people who just heard from God can put something else in his place if they aren’t paying attention.” The kids need to feel that sting.

Aaron is not the hero of this chapter. When Moses comes back and asks what happened, Aaron’s answer is one of the more pathetic lines in the Bible: “I threw the gold in the fire, and out came this calf” (Exodus 32:24). He blames the people, he blames the fire, he blames anything but himself. You don’t need to dwell on this with the kids, but if a kid notices, don’t soften it. Leaders fail too.

Mercy is the surprise ending. Exodus 32 is grim. People die. But the chapter doesn’t end with God walking away. Moses prays for the people — “please forgive their sin” (32:32) — and God hears him. The covenant survives. God’s people deserved to be wiped out and weren’t. The kids should leave knowing that God was serious about the sin *and* serious about keeping his promise. Both.

What we’re skipping and why. Exodus 32:25–29 (the Levites killing three thousand people) is the hardest part of the chapter for kids. It’s there in the text and it matters, but for grades 2–5 the consequence is best summarized as “people died because of what they did” without dwelling on the mechanics. Stay focused on the sin, Moses’ anger, Moses’ prayer, and God’s mercy.

Repeat the bottom line all morning. Say it at least six times. Have the kids say it back. Write it on the board. End with it.

MATERIALS

- Bibles for every student
- Whiteboard or large paper, markers
- Pencils, crayons or colored pencils
- A small mirror
- A toy or gadget the kids will recognize (phone, game controller, popular toy)
- A Bible to hold up alongside the other items
- Activity sheets (printed in advance from this week’s activities — pick what you’ll use)

1. Gather

Welcome the kids back. Tell them today’s story happens just a few weeks after the last one. God’s people heard God speak from the mountain. They promised to keep his commandments. Today we find out how long that promise lasted.

ASK

What’s something you’ve been waiting a long time for? How does waiting make you feel?

Let two or three kids answer. Then tell them: today God’s people are going to get tired of waiting on God — and they’re going to do something about it that breaks God’s heart.

Write the bottom line on the board:

SAY

God alone gets first place.

2. The Story

Setting the Stage

Tell them, in your own words: a few weeks ago they heard about Mount Sinai — the thunder, the smoke, the Ten Commandments. After God gave the commandments, Moses went *up* the mountain to get more of God’s instructions for the people. And he stayed up there. Forty days. The people waited at the bottom of the mountain. And waited. And waited.

And while Moses was gone, the people did something nobody saw coming.

The People Get Impatient

Have everyone open to Exodus 32. Pick a confident reader for the opening.

Exodus 32:1–6

DISCUSSION

1. Why were the people so impatient?

→ *Moses had been gone forty days. They didn’t know if he was coming back. They felt alone — and instead of trusting God, they went looking for a god they could see.*

2. What did Aaron build, and what did he build it out of?

→ *A golden calf, made out of the people’s earrings and gold. He melted the gold and shaped it into a calf.*

3. The Ten Commandments were brand new. Which of them did the people just break?

→ *The first two. “You shall have no other gods before me” and “you shall not make idols.” Have a kid look up Exodus 20:3–4 and read it out loud. They broke the very first thing God said.*

God Sees What’s Happening

Up on the mountain, God already knows. Have a different student read the next part:

Exodus 32:7–10

DISCUSSION

1. How did God describe what the people had done?

→ *They had “turned aside quickly from the way.” Quickly. It had only been forty days, and they had already forgotten.*

2. How did God feel about it?

DISCUSSION

→ *Angry. He calls them “stiff-necked” — stubborn, hard to teach. He’s serious about this. Sin is not a small thing.*

Now have a student read what Moses does next:

Exodus 32:11–14

DISCUSSION

1. What did Moses do when God was angry?

→ *Moses prayed for the people. He asked God to remember his promise to Abraham. Moses stood between God’s anger and God’s people.*

2. The end of verse 14 says God “relented.” What does that mean?

→ *God didn’t destroy them. He listened to Moses’ prayer. The covenant survived because God is merciful — even when his people completely fail him.*

Moses Comes Down the Mountain

Have one more student read what happens when Moses actually sees the calf:

Exodus 32:19–20

SAY

Moses had been carrying two stone tablets — the actual Ten Commandments, written by God’s own finger. When he saw the people worshipping the calf, he threw them down and broke them. Then he burned the calf, ground it into powder, and made the people drink it. Moses wasn’t being dramatic. He was showing them how serious this sin was. God alone gets first place.

NOTE

If you’re using the optional video (Saddleback Kids — The Golden Calf, 3 min), this is the place. It retells the story with art and gives the kids a visual. The lesson works fine without it.

3. The Point

Say the bottom line again, with the kids:

SAY

God alone gets first place.

What’s My Idol?

Hold up the three items in turn — the mirror, the toy or gadget, and the Bible.

SAY

Sometimes the thing we worship most is ourselves. (Hold up the mirror.) Sometimes the thing we pay most attention to is stuff. (Hold up the toy.) But God deserves first place. (Hold up the Bible.) An idol isn’t always a gold statue. An idol is anything we let take God’s spot.

The Memory Verse

Have everyone turn to Exodus 20:3. Read it together:

SCRIPTURE

Exodus 20:3

You shall have no other gods before me.

Read it three ways: all together normally, then with one finger pointing up on the word “no,” then once with the kids each pointing at themselves on the word “you.”

What This Means For Us

DISCUSSION

1. The Israelites couldn't see God, so they made something they could see. What are some things kids your age sometimes treat like they matter more than God?

→ *Listen for: video games, phones, sports, popularity, being good at school, getting their way. Don't shut down honest answers. The point isn't that these things are evil — the point is that anything can become an idol if it takes God's spot.*

2. Things like games, sports, and friends aren't bad. So what's the difference between enjoying something and making it an idol?

→ *An idol is what you go to first. What you trust more than God. What you'd be lost without. If you'd rather play your game than pray, miss church to win a trophy, or be mean to a friend to keep your popularity — that thing has taken God's place.*

3. What's one thing you can do this week to keep God in first place?

→ *Listen for specifics. “Be good” is too vague. Push for: pray before you play, read your Bible before screen time, choose church over the tournament, thank God when something good happens instead of just enjoying it.*

Closing Prayer

PRAY

God, your people built a golden calf because they got tired of waiting on you. We do the same thing in different ways. We let our games, our stuff, our friends, even ourselves, take the place that belongs to you. Forgive us. Help us this week to keep you in first place — to come to you first, trust you first, love you first. Thank you for being a God who forgives, like you forgave your people in the wilderness. Amen.

4. The Work

Pick one or more activities from this week's menu. Print enough copies for each kid in advance. The kids don't have to do all of them — pick what fits the group's energy and what time you have left.

The menu for this week:

- **The Golden Calf** — coloring page of the wilderness camp with the calf and dancing crowd, and the memory verse.
- **No Other Gods** — word search with words and names from the golden calf story (includes a sneak peek of next week).
- **What Gets My Time?** — drawing prompt where the kids draw the thing that competes hardest with God for their attention.
- **First Place** — fill-in-the-blanks recall using the kids' Bibles.

The full production specs for each activity are in this week's activities file.

NOTE

While the kids work, sit with them. Ask one or two what they're working on. Reinforce the bottom line one more time before class ends.

What Comes Next Week

The kids will see what God does next — how he keeps walking with his people even after the golden calf, and how he tells Moses to build a tabernacle so God can live right in the middle of his people's camp.