

TROUBLES IN THE DESERT

Exodus 32; Numbers 13:26 – 14:45, 20:1 – 21:8

Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights receiving the Ten Commandments from God, and the people below wondered if he would ever come back.

They came to Aaron and demanded, 'We don't know what has happened to Moses. Let us make gods to lead us.'

Aaron told them to take off the gold earrings the women and children were wearing and give them to him so they could be melted down to make an idol.

The gold was melted down and shaped into a golden calf.

The people responded by declaring, 'These are our gods who brought us up out of Egypt.'

'Tomorrow there will be a festival,' declared Aaron.

Early the next day, people sacrificed burnt offerings, ate, drank and started a wild, noisy party worshipping the golden calf.

Meanwhile, Moses, who was still high on Mount Sinai, was instructed by God. 'Go down immediately. The people I brought out of Egypt have become rotten.'

'They have made an idol cast in the shape of a calf and are bowing down and offering sacrifices. They are saying, "These are our gods who brought us out of Egypt."'

God was so upset by their disobedience he told Moses He wanted to destroy them.

Moses pleaded with God not to destroy the people He had rescued from Egypt. He knew God had promised to make them into a great nation.

Moses took hold of the two stones on which God had engraved His commandments and started walking down the mountain.

Halfway down Moses met Joshua who had been waiting for him. 'It sounds like there is a war in the camp,' said Joshua. 'It is not the sound of victory or defeat,' replied Moses. 'It is the sound of singing.'

When Moses saw the people wildly dancing to the golden calf he was angry. He threw the two stone tablets to the ground at the foot of the mountain, breaking them into pieces.

Moses took the calf the people had made and burned it in the fire. Then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.

Moses turned on Aaron. 'What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great disobedience?' 'When they saw you were gone a long time they wanted gods to lead them,' protested Aaron. 'I put gold in the fire and out came this calf.'

Moses stood at the entrance to the camp and said, 'Whoever is for the Lord, come to me.'

Those in a tribe called the Levites rallied to him. Moses told them to get their swords and carry out God's punishment on those who had disobeyed Him.

The Levites carried out the order. Moses then told them, 'As you have shown your loyalty to God He has chosen you to serve Him.'

Moses called the rest of the people together. 'You have committed a great sin, but I will go up and talk with God.'

Moses climbed back up the mountain to ask God to forgive His people for their disobedience.

God told Moses that those who had worshipped the golden calf would be punished with a plague but the rest would be led on to the land God had promised to give them.

God told Moses to chisel two new tablets of stone and return to the mountain again. The Lord then wrote on these tablets what he had written before, the Ten Commandments. Moses came back down the mountain and put the tablets in the Ark of the Covenant. These are the laws God has given for us all to obey.

Turning their backs on God caused all kinds of problems for the people of Israel. They could not find water and they and their animals became very thirsty.

They complained bitterly to Moses, 'Why did you ever make us leave Egypt? We would rather be dead than in this terrible place.'

Moses spoke with the Lord about their complaint and God told him what to do. 'Gather the people together and speak to the rock and it will pour out water.'

Moses obeyed and gathered everyone before the big rock outside the camp. Then he struck the rock with his rod.

God caused sparkling water to stream out of the rock so everyone and the cattle could drink. But this was not the only problem the people faced as they moved on through the wilderness.

Some time later, the Canaanite army swarmed towards them.

Helpless against such a mighty army the people turned to God in their need. And God was ready to help.

A terrible battle was fought and God gave Israel a tremendous victory.

Yet in spite of all God's help and goodness these people would not trust their lives to God's care. As they continued their journey around the Kingdom of Edom they began to grumble.

They complained how tired they were of travelling and how fed up they were of searching for water. They even complained about the manna, the daily food God sent them.

Not only did they say mean things about Moses but they spoke out against God. So God decided to teach them that rebellion is sin and must be punished.

Suddenly fiery serpents swarmed in from the desert among the terrified Israelites.

People tried to run away but the snakes were everywhere. There was no escape.

Many Israelites were dying from the deadly snake bites.

The people came to Moses and said, 'We have disobeyed God and spoken against Him. Please ask God to take the serpents away.'

So Moses prayed and the Lord told him what to do. 'Make a fiery serpent of brass and put it on a pole. Everyone who has been bitten who looks at the brass serpent will live.'

It happened just as God said. Those who trusted God and looked at the brass serpent lived. Those who refused to look all died.

As God provided a way for the Israelites to be free of the penalty of their sins so God has provided a way for us to be forgiven too.

When Jesus died on the cross the meaning of the brass serpent became clear. Jesus said, *'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.'* (John 3:14)

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