

## Moses in the Reeds: Exodus 1:15-2:1-10

### *Leader's reflection*

This story is one of courage, heart-break and God's provision for His people. First, we have the bravery of the midwives. The writer of Exodus saw fit to include their names, so that they would not be lost to the anonymity of time. The recognition of these women and their quiet opposition of Pharaoh's scheme is clearly meant to be remembered by the Israelites, as well as their faithfulness to God and His people. Eventually though, Pharaoh tires of the midwives, and goes through a more direct route. He instructs his people, the Egyptians, to turn on the Israelites among them. Pharaoh's hatred of the Israelites comes from his fear of them. He is scared that they will overthrow his rule and take power, and so he instils this fear and division into his people. And so the Israelites are subject to a persecution based on their race. They are the alien in Egypt, unwelcome, unwanted, feared and hated.

Into this backdrop, a woman is introduced who gives birth to a son, and out of fear for his life, hides him for as long as she can. But after 3 months, she can't hide him any longer, and so she prepares a basket for him, making it watertight, and places him in the Nile in the reeds. But why? What was her plan? We don't know whether she hoped he would be found, whether she would go back for him, or if this was goodbye.

This uncertainty is the heart-break at the centre of the story. We don't know what her plan was, only what her actions were. But in this, we see courage again. In Moses' sister, who stays with her brother to see what will happen. And this is where we see God's provision. The princess comes to bathe at the river, and comes to the spot where the basket is. She sends a slave girl to open it and she feels sorry for the baby she sees. The fear of the Israelites and their growing numbers evaporates in the face of a tiny baby boy. She is well aware that he is a Hebrew, and yet she takes pity on him. Moses's sister's courage shines through here, and she steps forward to suggest that she find someone to look after the child for the princess.

God's provision is obvious. Moses is returned to his family to be brought up under the protection of the princess, and not only that, but the princess pays for the mother to look after her own son.

When the boy grew older, the mother has to give him up once again, but this time into the safety and prosperity of the royal family.

This story raises plenty of questions, but throughout, even though He isn't explicitly mentioned, God can be seen working through various different people and situations. Why? Ultimately to secure the freedom of His people.

<b>Aim</b>	Explore how God uses people's actions and how God more often than not uses people to fulfil his plans.
<b>Main points to cover</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. God was in control even if no one could see that at the time.</li><li>2. God acted through the bravery of the sister.</li><li>3. God acted through the compassion of the Princess.</li></ol>
<b>Focus On</b>	The actions of the women

### *Activity ideas*

Before you read it, ask the young people they know the story. If they do, ask them to tell you the story, or together to draw you the story. Once you have done this, read the story together and mark the differences between their version and the actual story. If they have seen the Prince of Egypt film, they may tell you the version of the story from there.

Taking the story apart. Have the reading printed out on pieces of paper with plenty of space for the young people to scribble all over. Get them into pairs and ask them to read through the story, thinking about the questions, 'Who is the hero in this?' There is no clear answer to this, and can change depending on your perspective. Discuss what the young people think and why.

Application and prayer activity: You will need a cupcake case for person and a large bowl of water. Ask each young person write or draw on a piece of paper something they are worried about and want God's help with. They can then fold or screw up that piece of paper and place it in their cupcake case, which they can then float on the water. Remind them that God holds us in the same way that he protected that baby in the reeds, and pray as a group that God would help the young people with the things they have asked for help with.

**Moses flees and finds the burning bush: Exodus 2:11-17, 3-4:17*****Leader's reflection***

In this reading we see how Moses is set apart in two contrasting ways. First, we see how he sees himself as a Hebrew, but because of the privilege in his upbringing, the Hebrews do not see him as one of them. He is set apart from his people, separated by a gulf of experience that he doesn't understand at first. Second, we see how he is set apart by God to call the people to freedom and to challenge Pharaoh.

Our reading starts with a young prince going out to visit his people as they work. This may be the first time he had seen them working. Nevertheless, he witnesses an Egyptian beating a Hebrew and steps in to stop it, and in doing so kills the man. He hides the evidence and seems to believe he has got away with it. In his stepping in, we can see that he felt responsibility for the Hebrews, and that he felt he was one of them. This comes across again in the next verse, when he sees Hebrews fighting and steps in, seemingly to mediate. But the Hebrews do not appreciate his mediation, and turn on him. They do not see him as one of them, he is set apart.

On top of this, they know he has killed an Egyptian. Moses was not as careful as he thought.

Pharaoh hears what has happened and tries to kill Moses, giving him no choice but to flee. Moses ends up in Midian where he settles, marrying a woman called Zipporah. Fast forward and Moses is out shepherding. While out, he spies a bush on fire, but not being consumed by the fire. Here we find him being set apart for the purpose that will cover the rest of his life: the freedom of the Hebrews and their journey to the Promised Land.

The conversation between God and Moses is enlightening. God has compassion for his people, and wants Moses to be a vessel for that compassion in their release. But Moses seems to have taken on board his separation from the rest of the Hebrews. In vs 11 he asks, "Who am I that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt". God seems to completely ignore his objection, simply stating that He will go with him, before



outlining to Moses what will happen. But Moses still isn't convinced. In 4:1, he is still objecting, asking how the Hebrews will believe that he has been sent by God. So God gives him signs to show. In 4:10, Moses again objects, arguing (spot the irony) that he is not eloquent in speech, and so will not be able to convince people. God's answer? To remind Moses who made the human mouth, and to say that He will help him to speak.

Moses, now out of excuses, simply asks God to send someone else. But God has set apart Moses for this. He will be with him to help, and He will send Aaron with him, but this is Moses' task. Finally, Moses accepts his task.

In this reading, we see Moses' humanity. Often Moses seems to hang over the Bible like a giant. He is the chosen one to help the chosen people escape. But his hesitancy here reminds us that he was like us, and like him, when God calls we try to put it off. God will continue to call us, He will continue to give us the tools to fulfil His calling, and we need to walk in trust with Him.

### **Aim**

Explore how Moses felt when he was rejected by his people and chosen by God.

### **Main points to cover**

1. Moses thought he was a Hebrew, but he was separated from his people by his upbringing
2. Moses fought hard against what God was choosing him to do.
3. Eventually Moses accepted what God said about him.

### **Focus On**

Moses's pain at being rejected and his nervousness at being chosen



**Activity ideas**

**Rejected and chosen:** Talk to the young people about times when they have felt rejected by the people around them. How did this happen and why? If you have a story of this happening to you this would be a good time to share it. Explain that in this story, we are going to see someone who was rejected who is then chosen to serve God and achieve great things. Explain that we might not always feel chosen and special, but God tells us that we are, and we might feel like we won't achieve great things, but God tells us that if we are faithful to Him, we will do great things for Him.

**Telling the story:** Split the young people into teams. Give them each a sheet with three columns marked as 'God Says', 'Moses Says' and 'Who Wins?' As you tell the story of Moses and the bush, get the young people to write down Moses' objections alongside God's answers. At the end see how many they have, (they should have 5 of each), and get them to fill in any they are missing. Talk through each of them and see who they think wins at each objection: God or Moses.

**I am chosen? Prayer activity.** We are really good at thinking about the things we are bad at, or the things we think we are lacking in. Those things can actually be opportunities for us to lean on God. Moses had lots of reasons not to be chosen, but God chose him and Moses had to rely on God. Get the young people into pairs and ask them to write down the things they think they are bad at or are lacking. Then have them swap their piece of paper with their partner and have them write down why that could be an opportunities to rely on God instead of thinking we have to be good at everything ourselves.

## Moses vs Pharaoh: The Plagues: Exodus 5, 7:14-11:10

### *Leader's reflection*

This can be one of the more difficult parts of the Bible to read, especially with children and young people. Throughout this story, God sends plagues on the Egyptians, but how can we see the loving, caring God we believe in in this story?

If we change our perspective, however and see the plagues as warnings and reminders, rather than as punishments (with the exception of the final plague), then we start to see things differently. The number of plagues might then be a sign of God's love, not just for his people, but also for the Egyptians?

In Exodus 5, Moses and Aaron approach Pharaoh for the first time, and simply ask for the chance to take the people of Israel into the wilderness for 3 days to worship and perform sacrifice. Interestingly at this point, they say that if they don't, the Israelites will be struck with plagues, not the Egyptians. In Pharaoh's response to this request we get a glimpse of the sort of ruler that he is. Not only does he refuse to allow the Israelites to go, he punishes them for asking. He accuses them of laziness and takes away the straw they use to make bricks while maintaining their quota. Having to collect the straw as well as make the bricks each day would have been an impossible task. We can see from this that Pharaoh was not a fair man, but rules with a cruelty, and this cruelty comes out further when we see his reaction to the various plagues.

Plague 1: Water into blood. Pharaoh simply walks away from Moses and doesn't take it to heart. (Ex 7:23)

Plague 2: Frogs. Pharaoh agrees to let the Israelites go and worship, but when the frogs disappear, he changes his mind.

Plague 3: Gnats. This is the first plague that Pharaoh's magicians cannot replicate, and so they attribute it to God. But Pharaoh does not listen.

Plague 4: Flies. Pharaoh starts to change his mind, possibly because his palace was full of flies. He tells the people to go and sacrifice in the land of Egypt, but Moses



replies that isn't good enough. So Pharaoh allows them to go further, but not too far. Once again, once the flies have gone, Pharaoh changes his mind.

**Plague 5: Livestock.** All of the Egyptian, but none of the Israelite, livestock will die.

Pharaoh's heart is hardened, and he does not let them go,

**Plague 6: Boils.** Once again, Pharaoh's heart is hardened. There is a question here about whether Pharaoh suffers from boils, as his magicians are mentioned as suffering, but not him.

**Plague 7: Hail.** The Israelites are spared from the hail, while the Egyptians are not. They are given a warning to keep the livestock and servants inside so they do not suffer. Pharaoh starts to relent, and lets the Israelites go a short way, but once the hail stops, he changes his mind.

**Plague 8: Locusts.** The spelt and wheat, which survived the hail, are now destroyed by the locusts. The officials start to beg Pharaoh to let the people go, as Egypt has been destroyed.

**Plague 9: Darkness.** The whole land was covered in darkness, apart from Goshen where the Israelites live. Pharaoh allows the people to go, but they must leave everything they own. Without their animals they could not worship, and so Pharaoh refuses to allow them to leave.

**Plague 10: Death of the firstborn.** Only after this does Pharaoh relent and allow the people to leave. This seems to be the first plague that affects him personally, all the rest hurt his people and his kingdom, but not him. This one does.

In Pharaoh we see a selfish and cruel ruler who is given multiple chances to save his kingdom and his people. Each plague is a warning that what comes next will be worse, and each warning is ignored. Until Pharaoh is affected. He does not listen to the pleas of his people or his officials, and because of his stubbornness, he and his people suffer the worst plague of all.

Only then is his heart changed.

Often when people speak of this story, they jump straight to the last plague to try and argue that the God of the Old Testament is cruel, but to do that is to miss the context that the last plague occurs in. It is a last resort, used to finally persuade the mind of a cruel ruler to follow the instructions of God. When we see it like that, we see the patience of God expressed through the previous plagues, and the many chances to turn from the path of destruction that Pharaoh was given.





## ***Aim***

Explore how God shows His love for His people by working for their good and the patience He shows the Egyptians by giving them many chances.

## ***Main points to cover***

1. God shows His power to release His people.
2. God shows His patience and love by the number of plagues and chances He gives Pharaoh to change his mind.
3. God's love for his people shines through his actions.

## ***Focus On***

The number of chances God gives the Egyptians to allow the Israelites to go, and the picture of this story that they show us.

### Activity ideas

What do the young people think? This is a top and tail activity, with you asking the same questions at the start and the end of the session. The idea is to see if the young people change their thinking through the session. Start by asking the young people what they think this story tells us about God? What words would they use to describe God if they had this story to go on? List them and keep it for later. Once you have explored the story in a bit more depth, ask them again to describe God according to this story. See if there is a contrast and if so, what has caused them to change their minds.

Seeing with clear eyes. Sometimes we can let the world's view of God affect our view of God. Often stories like this one are used to show how God is cruel, but to read it like that is not to see the story clearly. We need to see a progression in the story, because when we do, we see the number of chances that Pharaoh was given, and how he refused to change his mind. Split the young people in to two groups. Ask one group to look at each of the plagues, giving them verses to look at. What picture of God emerges? Ask the second group to look at Pharaoh's reaction to each of the plagues. What picture of Pharaoh emerges? Once you have done this, bring the groups together to share what they have learnt. Explain that we need to see this story clearly, to get a clear picture of God from it. God acts in response to Pharaoh, and because Pharaoh continues to bury his head in the sand and ignore the warnings of those around him, God has to continue to escalate His actions. God does not enjoy what He has to do, but see's the necessity of it to release his people.

Chances... How many chances did God give Pharaoh to change his mind? Explain how we can see that God loves His people and wanted them to be free. He sent the plagues so that His people would be released, but that He also showed how patient He was by making the plagues become progressively worse. Explore with the young people how the plagues got worse, and that each time Pharaoh had the chance to change his mind. How many chances do we give our friends when they hurt us? Ask the young people if they have had a friend who they have fallen out with, and if appropriate, ask them to explain what happened. Ask them if they could give their friend another chance to be friends, and show them God's love by forgiving them.



**Moses: Crossing the Red Sea: Exodus 12:13-42, 13:17-14:31*****Leader's reflection***

Following the harrowing events of the plagues, the people of Israel are set free and leave Egypt to head to freedom. They are told to turn back and camp by the sea. As the people become aware that they are being chased by Pharaoh, they begin to panic and we see the first glimpse of the sort of complaining that will occur again and again throughout the Israelites travels through the wilderness. They complain to Moses, saying that he should have left them in Egypt, that they were better off serving the Egyptians than having freedom.

Moses shows huge patience with them, and tells them to trust in God, to wait and see what God will do for them. The next line shows the comic timing the Bible sometimes has. Immediately after Moses has told the people to trust in God and wait to see him at work, God tells Moses to get on and do something. He tells the Israelites to break camp and for Moses to stretch out his staff over the sea so that it will divide to allow the Israelites through.

Alongside this though, we see God acting as well. The pillar of cloud, which has been guiding Israel during the day, moves from the front of the Israelites to behind them, and blocks the path of the Egyptians to them.

Here we see something which we can often forget. God does act in the world, but he also wants us to act as well alongside him. Moses stretches out his hand and the sea parts, allowing the Israelites to move through. The Egyptians follow but God throws them into confusion, stopping them from chasing properly and allowing the Israelites to escape to the other side.

Moses then stretches out his hand again, and the waters close on Pharaoh and his chariots.



This story finishes by telling us the result of Israel witnessing these things. They see the great power of the Lord, and they believe in Him and in Moses. It's easy to forget that these people have known of their difference from the Egyptians, but never really known God, as it was so long since Joseph and his brothers, who did know God, had died.

This is another passage which can make for difficult reading and more difficult questions. Why does God destroy pharaoh and his army? How could God act in this way? When we see this story in its wider narrative through, it doesn't seem that way. God has given Pharaoh many chances to allow the people to escape, he has let them go, and the changed his mind, again. He is following them to kill them, capture them and enslave them again. God has given the Egyptians many chances to turn away from this course of action, but they have followed it anyway. In those chances, and in His salvation of Israel, we see God's love acted out for the good of his people.

<b>Aim</b>	To consider how God acts for the good of his people, but asks us to act too
<b>Main points to cover</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. God leads his people to safety.</li><li>2. He protects them from danger.</li><li>3. He asks Moses to act too</li></ol>
<b>Focus On</b>	How Moses ask the people to trust God, and then God asks Moses to be a part of His saving action



### *Activity ideas*

Using what God has given us. In the previous story we have seen Moses' staff used to do miraculous things. It was given to Moses by God, and was used to initiate some of the plagues. In later chapters it will be used to get water from a stone, and to win battles when raised in the air. It was given by God to be used, and yet when the people are trapped by the Egyptian chariots, and Moses needs to act, he forgets what God has given him. Often we can do this. We turn to God to fix things that He has given us the skills to deal with. Use this as a focus for prayer. Get the young people to speak to God about the things they are worried about, and ask God to show them what skills they have already to help them deal with those things. Have the young people write down anything they think God might be saying to them, then share these things together at the end.

The complaining begins... As a group ask the young people to list the things they have complained about in the last week, then get them to divide them into A) Problems and B) First world problems. Where do most of the things fall? Get the young people to pick out in the story the complaining of the people of Israel. What are they complaining about? Are they justified to complain? Explain that you will return to the idea of the complaining next week, and explore how we can seek God even when we are complaining.

Where is God leading you? The Israelites were being led into the wilderness to the promised land, but the promised land was a long way away. They would not have been able to see the destination, only the journey. This can be the same for us, we can see the hard work that we are going to have to do, or the struggles that we will face, but not where God is leading us. Get the young people to list the stresses they have in their life, and the worries that they face. Ask them if they can see where God is leading them in these. Explain that the Israelites couldn't see where they were headed from the Red Sea, but they knew that God was with them. In the same way, we know that God is with us and is leading us. Read Jeremiah 29:11 to them, and get them to pray through it.

**Moses: Complaining in the wilderness: God provides what is needed:  
Exodus 15:22-27, 16**

***Leader's reflection***

This is the first section of the wandering in the wilderness immediately after the escape from Pharaoh's army.

The first point to make here is that often when we think of the wilderness that Israel crossed, we think of a desert-like landscape with little vegetation and very little that could provide sustenance. This is not an entirely accurate view of what the wilderness was like. It was a steppe land, with low rainfall and sparse vegetation, suitable for grazing sheep and goats, but not much else. It would therefore have been good for small agricultural communities to live in, but less ideal for a large body of people moving through for a sustained period of time. It is into this context that God's generosity and graciousness are placed.

The first round of grumbling occurs three days after the crossing of the Red Sea, setting the tone for the rest of the time in the wilderness. After travelling for three days, they find no water, before coming to Marah, where they find bitter water (this would have been standing water, and therefore unfit to drink). But God provides for the people, and shows Moses how to make the water drinkable.

A brief respite at Elim occurs, where the people find plenty of food and water. However, they move on after a short while. This could have been because their numbers were so great that they drained the land they stayed in, as well as the need to move through the wilderness. Shortly after this, the second round of grumbling begins, but this time much more seriously. The Israelites begin not just complaining, but wishing that they had been left in Egypt where they had food and water.

This grumbling is more serious than the petulance it implies. The Israelites are wishing that they had not experienced the salvation that God offered them; they are actively turning their backs on Him. What is God's response? He shows them grace and care



through His provision for them.

God says that in the mornings, He will rain bread from heaven for them, and that they are to collect enough for each day, and then two days' worth on the sixth day, so as to keep the Sabbath holy. Not only that, but He will also provide meat for them, by providing quail in the evening. Simple instructions are given to the people; they are to gather enough for each day and not store any. Any that is stored is found to have rotted overnight, and to be full of worms and smell.

There is a simple, but important message at the heart of this story.

God provides for His people.

God provides for His people when they complain.

He provides for His people when they reject Him.

He provides for His people when they are ungrateful.

Because His actions are governed by love, and that love is expressed through grace and patience.

**Aim**

Explore how God provided for His people and how He provides for us today.

**Main points to cover**

1. God provides what His people need to survive.
2. He provides for them even as they complain about being led to freedom.
3. He shows them why they should trust in His provision.

**Focus On**

How hard it can be to trust in God.



**Activity ideas**

The complaining continues...Remind the young people of the complaining activity we started last week. Get them to re-list any extra things they have complained about during the week, and add them to the A) Problems or B) First world problems categories. Ask the young people to read Exodus 16:3. What is the complaint of the Israelites? Why are they upset? Are they justified? Once you have looked at these, look at Exodus 16:10-12. Who were the people grumbling about? How many of our complaints are ultimately about God, feeling that He should give us more than He does? Is that fair? Explore how God gives what we need, and provides for us like He provided for the Israelites.

Appreciating what we have. Following on from the previous activity, ask the young people to give thanks for the things they have. You could do this generally over their lives, but it could work better for them to think back over the last week and think of the good things that have happened each day, so that each of them end up with seven things to be thankful for.

Testimony time. Have a short story ready, or find one from someone else, of a time that God has provided what was needed when it was needed. Often we see these things as good fortune, but if we start looking more and more for God's provision, then we will become more aware of when He provides for us.



**God gives His law: the Ten Commandments**  
**Reading: Exodus 19:20-25, 20:1-21**

***Leader's reflection***

This is one of the most famous parts of the Bible, depicted in so many different ways through many centuries. This was the first Pentecost, which is celebrated to this day in Jewish culture as the giving of the Law. The first Pentecost was when God showed His people how they were to live, how their lives were to be different, and how they were to be a light among the nations.

The giving of the law starts in Chapter 19, with God descending onto Mount Sinai, and Moses ascending to meet Him. There is a beautiful image here, of man and God meeting in a sacred space. There is something here which speaks to us today of the power and magnitude of what prayer is - the meeting of God and human, in a sacred bubble of time and space. This sacredness is emphasised in v21-23, with the entire mountain being marked off from the people, as a holy site. Later, we see the same indication of holiness with the separation of the inner sanctum of the Tabernacle.

Following this meeting within a sacred space, the commandments are given. It is worth remembering that what we mark as the ten commandments are merely the first in a long list of instructions given to govern the Israelite society. The entire Law, while seeming cruel and harsh to our contemporary eyes, is shocking in its radical valuing of human life. We need to remember that this was the rule of law given to a bronze age society and within it is contained guidelines for discerning guilt and punishment in a fair and just way. They are designed to ensure that those who fall to the bottom of society have a safety net to take care of them, and that violence between families is stopped and does not escalate, etc. Considering the societies surrounding Israel at the time, we need to remember how radical the Law was and not forget the values at the heart of the law and see it just as a set of rules.

The 10 Commandments are fascinating in and of themselves though. They can be split into two sections. The first 3 are entirely to do with how the people relate to God. They are to have no God's beside the Lord, they are not to worship



idols, and they are not to mis-use God's name.

The last 6 are entirely to do with living together in community with other people.

The fourth command feels like it straddles these two sections; the people are to keep the Sabbath holy, to remember that the Lord rested on the seventh day, but this also applies to animals, slaves and foreigners. It is concerned with both the Lord and with people.

Seen in this way, it is easy to see how Jesus was able to reduce the Law to two principles:

1. Love the Lord with all your heart.
2. Love your neighbour as yourself.

In doing this, Jesus was bringing the people back to the principles of the Law, and helping them to see why the Law was given.

When we see the Law as a list of instructions and rules, we miss the point of it. When we see it as an imposition on human freedom, we miss the point. When we see it as God reminding people that what matters most in the world is their relationship with Him, and their relationships with each other, we start to see the Law more clearly as what it is, and we start to see the value of it.

### **Aim**

Explore why the commandments were given and why they make a difference.

### **Main points to cover**

1. God gave the Law to show His people the best way to live.
2. The point of the Law was to create a society where people were looked after and there was fairness.
3. The Law was not a list of rules to follow, but a way of life to live.

### **Focus On**

The Law as life giving rather than restricting.



### Activity ideas

**Rules for a fair society:** Ask the young people to come up with rules for a society. Give them some space to come up with between 5 and 10 rules for people to live together. As they feedback, ask them what the purpose of their rules are? What is the aim behind them? Explain that you are going to explore the purpose behind the 10 commandments, so the young people can start to see them as life giving, rather than restricting.

**Splitting the commandments:** Write the commandments on individual pieces of paper, one per small group of young people. See if they can spot the different emphasis in them. e.g. the ones about God and the ones about people. They may come up with some brilliant ideas that you haven't spotted, so give them space to be creative in their thinking. Once they have had some time, explain that the commandments are split into two groups, and show them what they are. Explain that the ones about God come first, and the ones about people come second and ask if they can work out why. Explain to them that when we focus on God, then we treat people differently, because we understand that everyone is created and loved by God.

**Changing how we act...:** The ten commandments can help us to be less selfish in the way we live. Ask the young people think back over the last week and think about where they acted selfishly. This can be a difficult thing to do, so help the young people by being honest about your own week. The Commandments are there to help us shape how we live, not to tell us what to do. Encourage the young people to pray for each other once they have shared where they have been selfish, asking that we are each be able to listen to God, and to put Him first, and others before ourselves.

**Questions:** This could be a session that leads the young people to ask questions about the Law and the way that God wants us to live. Give them some space to ask questions about any of this stuff. Feel free to come back to questions you aren't sure of in the next weeks, to give you a chance to research them.

## The Incident with the Golden Calf

### Reading: Exodus 32

#### *Leader's reflection*

If there is a story which epitomises Israel's poor choices, this is it. After being released from slavery by the power of God; after being led through the sea; after being fed daily by the generosity of God, the people decide that this is not enough for them.

They are waiting at the bottom Mount Sinai, and have seen Moses ascend to speak to God. They have been given strict instructions not to go near the mountain, as it is Holy. But, after waiting for a while, they decide that enough is enough and turn to Aaron.

Aaron is shown to be a weak leader here as well. We often forget that he stood with Moses against Pharaoh, and that he has led alongside Moses from the beginning. So we should expect better from him, but when the people come to him and say, "Make us a god who will go before us.", he instructs them to bring him their gold, and fashions it into a golden calf. He then compounds this, by declaring the following day to be a festival to the Lord, and offered burnt offerings before the calf. The gravity of what happens here should not be underplayed. God has led the people to salvation, and has worked great deeds for them. He has extended grace to them, and they have rejected what has been given. They have seen the power of the Lord, and they have chosen to turn their backs on Him.

This doesn't go unnoticed by God. He instructs Moses to return to his people, tells him what they have done, and declares that He will destroy the people for what they have done.

But Moses stands between God and the people. He reminds God of the promises that He made to the patriarchs, that their offspring would be numerous. He argues that if God were to destroy His people, the Egyptians would lose their fear of the Lord.

This seems bizarre. Does God need reminding? Does God need persuading? Or is this a learning opportunity for Moses? Until now he has done as commanded, and led



according to what God has instructed. Here he takes responsibility for his people, and stands between them and the judgement of God. Here Moses is maturing into a leader willing to take responsibility, even at the cost of his own life. God's threats against the people here should be seen in the light of what changes in Moses, rather than an actual threat.

As he returns, carrying the words inscribed by the hand of God, his anger overflows, and he smashes the tablets. The man who stood between the people and God, now turns his anger on the people who have caused such chaos.

Aaron makes a pitiful excuse when challenged by Moses, and in the text you could see the real responsibility for what happened lying with Aaron. He claims that the calf appeared when he threw the gold into the fire, rather than the definite work he put into it which is described in v4.

This is a story which is repeated in each of us daily. We have each experienced the grace of God, we have seen God at work, we have seen and experienced the transformation that comes from Him, yet we worship our own idols of success, money, comfort, pleasure, and whatever else makes us tick. The good news is that because of the grace of God, we are daily forgiven for worshipping the idols we raise up instead of Him.

### **Aim**

To think about how we can be blind to God's provision and worship idols just like the people of Israel

### **Main points to cover**

1. The people have seen the amazing things that God has done for them.
2. The people choose to turn their backs on Him anyway.
3. God chooses to show grace to the people despite their actions.

### **Focus On**

The blindness of the people to see what God has done for them.



**Activity ideas**

What has God ever done for us? This is similar to a previous activity, but it is always good to cover again the good things God does for us. Ask the young people what God had done for the Israelites up to this point. Remind them if necessary. Explain that the Israelites decided that they didn't need God, despite all He had done for them. They decided to go their own way. Ask the young people to then think about all the things over the last week that God has given each of us. Remind them that all good things come from God, and that we need to remember this as we go about our lives.

What do we worship? Each of us has things in our lives that we worship, even if we don't realise it. The things we worship are the things we put the most effort into. Take a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle of it. On one side put 'God' and on the other put 'Other'. Ask the young people where their time has been spent this week? How much time have they put into their relationship with God? What things have they put more time into? Explore how they worship with their time, and as a group come up with some ways they can start to put their relationship with God in a more central place on their lives.

**Prayer:** With this session it is important to end in a positive place, otherwise the young people may leave feeling guilty and upset. Remind them that God loves each of us, and nothing we do can make Him love us more or less. But He wants to spend time with each of us, He wants us to get to know Him better and better. Put on some quiet worship music, and ask the young people to close their eyes, listen to the music, and ask God to speak to them. See if they have any feelings, pictures, or words they want to share afterwards.

**Moses loses his temper, and much else besides.  
Reading: Numbers 20:2-13**

***Leader's reflection***

This reading shows us why it was Joshua and not Moses who led the people into the Promised Land after 40 years in the wilderness.

It's worth remembering at this point that the Israelites were not supposed to spend all this time in the wilderness. When they arrived at the Jordan river for the first time, Moses sent spies across to report back on the state of the land. Of the 12 spies, 10 return saying that the people in the land are too powerful, and that the Israelites would never defeat them. The people believed them, instead of in the power of God to lead them to victory. So the generation who came out of Egypt and who experienced the delivery from slavery, are told they will not enter the promised land, only their children.

Fast forward 40 years, and the children of the freed slaves seem no better. They are still complaining, and even though they never experienced life in Egypt, they wish to go back there. As in other times of complaint, there is a valid reason for the people to complain. There is no water, but the people just go too far. Instead of turning to Moses and asking for him to speak to God about it, they throw their toys out of the pram and seem to claim it may as well be the end of the world.

As is the pattern at each of these times, Moses and Aaron fall down before God and ask for His provisions. And as the pattern has shown us, God provides. But Moses doesn't do as commanded. Instead of speaking to the rock, he smashes it with the staff after saying, "Must we bring water out of the rock for you?". God declares that because Moses and Aaron, "Did not trust Me to show My holiness in the sight of the people.", they will not lead the people into the promised land.

This seems like a harsh punishment, but we need to look at what they actually did. At a surface level, they did not strictly follow the commands of God, but their words and actions point to something else going on here. Moses' declaration of, "we" to the



people before striking the rock could show that he was claiming to provide the water for them. His striking of the rock showed that he did not entirely trust that if he followed instructions and spoke to the rock, things would work out. Therefore in this passage we see Moses and Aaron being guilty of exactly the same thing as the rest of the generation of Israelites who were not allowed to enter the promised land: distrust of God. The people disbelieved that God would be faithful to them and lead them safely into the land. Moses and Aaron disbelieved that God would do as He said, and acted on their own.

It is a sobering thought, but we shouldn't beat ourselves up about this. Throughout the Bible there is one thing that God requires of us: to believe in His grace. If we believe in that, then all else will follow. But it was God's grace that the Israelites doubted at the Jordan, and that Moses and Aaron doubted at Maribah.

### *Aim*

To consider the difference between belief and disbelief.

### *Main points to cover*

1. Moses wasn't punished for getting angry or frustrated.
2. Moses didn't believe that God would provide a way out of the situations and took matters into his own hands.
3. Moses didn't believe in the grace of God, but we can

### *Focus On*

Do we believe the things that God declares about us?





### *Activity ideas*

What do you believe? Ask the young people to list all the things that they believe. This could work well as a group activity with a flipchart. They can be trivial or profound, but encourage them to move towards thinking more deeply about these. Also encourage them you are looking for true answers, not the 'right' ones.

How do we show we believe? After getting ideas on the flipchart, ask the young people how they show their belief in each of the things on the board. Again, some of them will be trivial, some of them will have some depth. The key is to show that when we believe in something, it changes the way we act. If we stop believing that the air around us is safe, it will drastically change the way we behave. If we start believing that we are invincible, it will change how we behave. If we believe that God is real, alive, and active in the world, how does that change how we behave?

Do you believe what God says about you? We can read parts of the Bible where God declares His truth about us, and what God believes about us, but we can dismiss it, or ignore it. We find it easier to believe our own bad beliefs about ourselves than the good things God says about who we are. Find a selection of scriptures that declare what God believes about us as people, and give these out to the young people. As a group read them, and think about what it means for how they see themselves, and how they act. Spend some time praying at the end of this, asking God to implant the truths of what He says about the young people in their hearts, and to become part of how they see themselves.