

God's covenant



Exodus 19; 20; 24; 32

Moses led the people of Israel to Mount Horeb. There God revealed himself to his people in a dark cloud. He made a covenant with them and gave them the Ten Commandments. But the children of Israel soon turned away from God. When Moses had not returned from the mountain after forty days, the Israelites made a golden calf, worshipped it and sacrificed to it. Because of this God wanted to destroy his people. Moses tried to conciliate God.

The children learn that God made a covenant with the people of Israel.
The Lord expected his people to obey him and keep his commandments.

Several weeks after leaving Egypt the children of Israel reach Mount Horeb. It was here that Moses had originally been given the commission by God to free the Israelites from Egyptian bondage.

1

The tents are pitched at the foot of the mountain. The news soon spreads that God has called Moses to come up to him on the mountain. What will the Lord say to him there? The Israelites look up at the mountain again and again; they are filled with expectation. Finally Moses returns. They listen attentively to what he has to say: "God wants to enter into a covenant with us. If we obey his voice and keep this covenant, we shall be his property. We shall be a holy nation. Prepare yourselves—the Lord will reveal himself in three days' time." In reverence and awe the people prepare themselves for this holy moment. They wash their clothes. No one speaks an angry word. On the morning of the third day, a dark cloud floats over Mount Horeb. There is thunder and lightning. Suddenly the sound of a trumpet is heard. The Israelites approach the mountain with great reverence. Moses leads them up to a pre-arranged boundary. Only he is allowed to go beyond this point. The Lord descends upon the mountain in the form of fire, and the entire mountain is cove-

red in smoke. Moses speaks and God answers him in a loud voice. God gives the people the Ten Commandments. The first of these commandments is: "I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods besides me!" There is tremendous thunder and lightning. The mountain of the Lord is covered in smoke and a trumpet sounds. At first the people stand transfixed—they have never experienced anything like this, but then they panic and speak to Moses: "We would prefer you to speak to God." And so it happens. Moses withdraws and God speaks to him. Moses writes down everything which the Lord says to him. He builds an altar out of twelve large stones on which he brings a burnt offering to the Lord. He reads out to the people all that which God has instructed him. The Israelites listen and solemnly vow: "We will do everything the Lord has commanded us." Then Moses sprinkles them all with drops of blood from the sacrificial animals. It is the sign that God has entered into a covenant with the people of Israel. They have become God's people.

2

On God's instructions, Moses, Aaron and the elders ascend the mountain. There God appears to them. The pavement under his feet is like sapphires, a clear blue like heaven itself ... After the elders of the people of Israel have seen the Lord, they celebrate a meal. After some days, God again calls Moses to the mountain. He wishes to speak to him and give him tables of stone on which he himself has written the Ten Commandments. The

God is merciful, gracious and patient – Moses

people of Israel watch Moses go. They wonder when he will return. They keep looking over to the mountain, but Moses does not return. Day after day passes. The people are becoming impatient. Weeks go by. Has something happened to Moses? Nobody is allowed to go and look for him. God has forbidden them to go up the sacred mountain. After five weeks the Israelites believe Moses to be dead.

Shortly afterwards some of them go to Aaron and say to him: "Make a god for us who shall go before us! No one knows what has happened to Moses." Aaron instructs them to bring all gold earrings to him from which he fashions a golden calf, and the people exclaim: "This is the god who has led us out of the land of Egypt!" Aaron builds an altar and proclaims: "Tomorrow is the feast of the Lord!" Early the next morning the Israelites bring burnt and thank-offerings on this altar. Then they dance excitedly around the golden calf, their new god.

In the meantime God is speaking to Moses on Mount Horeb, telling him how the place of worship should be built. Finally, he hands over the Ten Commandments on two great tablets of stone. Forty days have passed in the meantime. God now sends Moses back. He also tells him what the Israelites are doing and threatens to destroy them.

Moses hastens down the mountain with great, purposeful strides. He is unspeakably sad, but also angry. Before he reaches the dancing crowd he stops. He cannot understand that the Israelites have forgotten their God so quickly. In a burst of anger he flings down the tablets with the Ten

Commandments and shatters them.

The Israelites are shocked when they see Moses coming. Suddenly all is quiet. Moses walks up to the idol and smashes it. The next morning Moses speaks to the people: "You have committed a great and grievous sin. I am going back up the mountain to see whether I can bring about atonement for your sins." But when Moses returns he is very sad and says to the people: "God wants to punish all who have sinned and transgressed his commandments." Contritely the Israelites take off their finery. Moses intercedes for his people again and pleads for forgiveness.

3



God entered into a covenant with the people of Israel. He told them: "I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods besides me!"

1 Do the children still remember the story of the burning bush? We look at the picture in teaching unit 1.2 once more.

2 We discuss the meaning of the covenant with the children. (Through this covenant the people are singled out from all other nations. They have become God's property; his people. The Lord expects the people to live according to his laws: they should love and honour God, respect one another, refrain from sin ...).

3 We read and discuss the first commandment. Then we discuss the picture. The Ten Commandments were written down by God himself. They are still valid. They may be enumerated, but should not be discussed.