

Session 1: Before There Were Priests

A Kingdom of Priests: Priesthood in the New Covenant

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim

The group discovers that priesthood does not begin at Sinai. It begins in a garden. Adam is placed in Eden with a job description that the Old Testament will later hand to sanctuary ministers; fathers and firstborn sons offer sacrifice for their households long before there is a Temple; and at Sinai, God names the destination of the whole story: "you shall be to me a kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6, RSV2CE). By the end of the night the group should feel a question forming that this study will spend twelve sessions answering: if Israel was meant to be a kingdom of priests, what happened, and what does Jesus do about it?

Catholic Touchstone

The Catechism teaches that the whole People of God shares in the priestly office of Christ (CCC 784), that Israel was constituted by God as "a kingdom of priests" (CCC 1539), and that in the New Covenant this one priesthood of Christ is shared in two distinct ways: the common priesthood of all the baptized and the ministerial priesthood, which differ essentially and not only in degree (CCC 1546 to 1547). This session lays the Old Testament foundation for both. Nothing tonight pits the two against each other; the whole study will show that both flow from the one priesthood of Christ.

What You Need to Know

Priesthood is one of the most misunderstood words in the modern religious vocabulary, and most of our young adults inherit their picture of it from either movies or polemics. Strip the word down to its biblical bones and a priest is a mediator who offers sacrifice, blesses in God's name, and guards what is holy. Tonight the group will find each of those functions operating before the book of Exodus ever mentions a priestly tribe.

Start in the garden. Genesis 2:15 says God put the man in Eden "to till it and keep it." In Hebrew the two verbs are 'abad (to serve, to work) and shamar (to keep, to guard). Be honest with the group about what English hides: this exact verb pair reappears in Numbers 3:7 to 8, where it describes what the Levites do in the tabernacle. English translations render the pair differently in the two places ("till and keep" in Genesis, "perform duties" and "minister" language in Numbers), so the link is invisible in most Bibles, but it is right there in the Hebrew text, and anyone with an interlinear or a concordance can verify it. Many scholars, ancient and modern, have concluded from this and from Eden's other sanctuary features (God walking in its midst, the east-facing entrance later guarded by cherubim, gold and precious stone, the tree motif that reappears on the lampstand) that Genesis presents Eden as the first sanctuary and Adam as something like its first priest: placed in sacred space to serve and to guard it. Present this as the strong and widely held reading it is, not as defined dogma; the Church has not defined an exegesis of Genesis 2:15, and honesty about that strengthens rather than weakens the point.

Next, the fathers. Before Sinai, who offers sacrifice? Abel brings the firstlings of his flock (Genesis 4:4). Noah builds an altar and offers burnt offerings as he leads his household off the ark (Genesis 8:20; the household frame is the narrative's, an inference we name as such). Job rises early to offer burnt offerings for each of his children, "for Job said, It may be that my sons have sinned" (Job 1:5). Abraham builds altars across the promised land (Genesis 12:7 to 8) and climbs Moriah with wood and fire (Genesis 22). Notice the pattern: no caste, no vestments, no temple, yet sacrifice is not a free-for-all either. It runs along the lines of the household:

Noah and Job offer as fathers for their families, and an ancient Jewish and Christian reading adds that the firstborn carried the family's worship (a tradition, not an explicit claim of these texts). Priesthood exists here in seed form, ordered to the family.

Then Sinai. In Exodus 19:5 to 6, before the Law is given, God announces Israel's vocation: "you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The whole nation is called priestly: a people whose corporate life mediates God to the world. But the sentence begins with a condition, "if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant," and Exodus 32 is where the condition meets the golden calf. In the aftermath, the sons of Levi rally to Moses and are consecrated for the LORD's service (Exodus 32:26 to 29), and God later takes the tribe of Levi, in place of the first-born of Israel, for sanctuary service under Aaron and his sons, who alone hold the priesthood proper (Numbers 3:10 to 13). Two honesty notes to keep crisp: Levites serve, Aaronides are the priests; and the Aaronic priesthood itself was commanded before the calf narrative (Exodus 28 to 29). What follows is a venerable theological reading, which this study adopts while naming it as a reading: after the calf, Israel's priestly vocation is not revoked, but it is wounded and placed under guardianship. That tension, a priestly people served by a set-apart priesthood within it, is the engine of this entire study, and the group should leave tonight feeling it rather than having it resolved.

One more figure walks through tonight, and you must resist every urge to explain him. Genesis 14:18: "And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High." Read the verse, let it hang, and move on. The Take-Home sheet asks each participant to write a sealed guess about him. Do not preview where the study is going with it.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Tonight is almost entirely roots, and that is by design: you cannot show what Christ fulfills until the group has touched what he inherits. The three root systems planted tonight are (1) the garden: sacred space served and guarded, which the study will follow to Christ the new Adam and to the sanctuary "not made with hands"; (2) the father and the firstborn: household priesthood, which the study will follow through Israel as God's "first-born son" (Exodus 4:22) to Christ the firstborn and, at the end, back down into every baptized household; and (3) the vocation of Exodus 19:6, whose exact words the group will meet again on the far side of the New Testament. When a New Testament author picks up one of these threads later in the study, the group will find the connection themselves with both passages open; that moment of discovery is the method.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. John Chrysostom

"The priesthood is exercised on earth, but ranks among heavenly institutions." For Chrysostom, the wonder of priesthood is precisely this vertical reach: a human being, standing on ordinary ground, handling holy things on behalf of others. Tonight the group watches that pattern appear before any official priesthood exists.

On the Priesthood, Book 3

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Ephrem the Syrian

St. Ephrem, in his Hymns on Paradise, portrays Eden in the language of a sanctuary: a holy mountain ascending by degrees, with the glory of God at its height, and Adam placed within it as one set apart for communion with God. In substance, Ephrem reads the garden the way tonight's discovery does: as sacred space, with the man placed within it, set apart for communion with God. (This is a faithful summary of

Ephrem's imagery rather than a single quotation.)

Hymns on Paradise

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Leo the Great

St. Leo teaches, in substance, that all who are reborn in Christ share a royal and priestly dignity: the sign of the cross makes them a kingly people, and the anointing of the Holy Spirit consecrates them as priests. Leo is preaching to ordinary baptized Christians, not to clergy. Keep his voice in your pocket all study long; he will matter enormously when the group reaches 1 Peter 2 in Session 8.

Sermon 4 (summary of Leo's teaching)

Catechism Connection

- CCC 784: on entering the People of God through faith and Baptism, one shares in this people's priestly vocation.
- CCC 1539: the chosen people was constituted by God as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," with Exodus 19:6 cited in the paragraph itself.
- CCC 1546 to 1547: the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood both participate in the one priesthood of Christ, and differ essentially and not only in degree. Tonight you only plant this; do not lecture it.

Thread Watch (leader only)

- THREAD A, THE SEALED GUESS: Melchizedek's bread and wine (Genesis 14:18). Planted tonight as a single unexplained verse; guesses sealed on Take-Home 1; opened in Session 6. Say nothing.
- THREAD B, SERVE AND GUARD: the 'abad and shamar pair. Planted tonight in Eden and Numbers 3; returns with the Levites (Session 2), with Christ the guardian of his own (Sessions 4 and 7), and with the priest's charge today (Session 11).
- THREAD C, THE FIRSTBORN: father-priests and the firstborn swap (Numbers 3). Returns with Israel as firstborn son, Christ the firstborn, and resolves in Session 12 in the baptized household.
- THREAD D, THE TITLE THREAD: "kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6). The group will meet these words again in 1 Peter 2:9 (Session 8) and Revelation 1:6 (Session 12). Never point forward to those texts; let the recognition land on its own.

Session Goals

1. The group discovers the 'abad and shamar link between Genesis 2:15 and Numbers 3:7 to 8 with the texts open, and understands honestly why English translations hide it.
2. The group identifies the father-priest pattern in Abel, Noah, Job, and Abraham without being told it in advance.
3. The group hears Exodus 19:5 to 6 as Israel's vocation and the golden calf narrative as the wound that narrows, without revoking, that vocation.
4. The steelman ("priesthood was temporary scaffolding") is felt at full strength and answered from the text, with the full answer honestly deferred to later sessions.
5. Melchizedek is glimpsed and NOT explained; every participant leaves with a sealed guess written.

Timed Plan (90 minutes)

- 0:00 Welcome and opening prayer (5 min)
- 0:05 Win questions (10 min)
- 0:15 Build I: The garden (20 min)
- 0:35 Build II: The fathers, and the steelman (20 min)
- 0:55 Build III: Sinai and the calf (15 min)
- 1:10 The Melchizedek minute (5 min; hold the silence)
- 1:15 Send questions (10 min)
- 1:25 Live It This Week, memory verse, closing prayer (5 min)

Pre-chosen cuts for a 75-minute room: drop the Dig Deeper box and compress Build III to Exodus 19:5 to 6 plus a one-sentence summary of the calf narrative (read Exodus 32:26 to 29 aloud yourself rather than having the group work it). Never cut the Melchizedek minute or the sealed guess.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord Jesus Christ, eternal High Priest, you have gone before us into the sanctuary not made with hands. As we open the Scriptures tonight, open our eyes to see what you have been building since the garden. Give us honest questions, patient ears, and hearts willing to be surprised. We ask this in your holy name. Amen.

Win (choose warmth over depth here)

1. When you hear the word "priest," what picture comes to mind first, and where do you think that picture came from?
2. Tell us about a time someone stood in for you, spoke for you, or acted on your behalf. What did that feel like?

Build I: The Garden

Read Genesis 2:15 aloud.

Q1. What two jobs does God give the man in the garden? Just name them from the text.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

"To till it and keep it." In Hebrew the verbs are 'abad (to serve, to work) and shamar (to keep, to guard). Do not reveal yet where this pair shows up again; the group finds that themselves in the next step.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Say: "Somewhere in Numbers 3:7 to 8 those same two Hebrew verbs, serve and guard, appear together again, describing a particular group of people and their work at a particular place. Find it. Who are they, and where do they do it?" Give the group two or three minutes with the passage.

Q2. The man in the garden and the ministers of the sanctuary share a job description. What might Genesis be telling us about the garden, and about the man?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The Levites 'abad and shamar the tabernacle; Adam 'abad and shamar the garden. Genesis is painting Eden as sacred space, the first sanctuary, and Adam as one placed in it to serve and to guard it: the posture of a priest. Be honest that English translations hide the link (the RSV2CE has "till and keep" in Genesis but different wording in Numbers); it lives in the Hebrew, and anyone with a concordance can check it. Be equally honest that the Church has not defined an interpretation of this verse; this is a strong and widely held reading of the text, ancient in its instincts (St. Ephrem sang of Paradise as a sanctuary), and the study will treat it as a root, not a proof.

Build II: The Fathers

Read Genesis 4:2 to 5, Genesis 8:20, and Job 1:4 to 5 aloud, dividing the passages around the room.

Q3. In each passage, who is offering the sacrifice? What official position does he hold? What seems to authorize him to do this?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Abel, Noah, Job: none of them holds an office. No temple, no tribe, no vestments exist yet. But notice that sacrifice is not random: where the offerer is a father, Noah and Job, it runs along household lines; Job offers specifically for his children, as their father. Priesthood exists here in seed form, and its earliest ordered pattern is the parent who offers for the family. (Abraham fits the same pattern: Genesis 12:7 to 8 and Genesis 22, if the group brings him up.)

STEELMAN: BUILD IT UP. Say this at full strength, and let it sit: "A thoughtful Protestant friend looks at these same passages and says: Exactly. Before Sinai, ordinary believers offered sacrifice with no priestly caste in sight. The Levitical priesthood was temporary scaffolding, erected for a season and torn down in Christ. So the New Testament church should look like the age of the patriarchs: every believer a priest, with pastors and elders for word and oversight if you like, but no SACRIFICING priestly class at all. Notice how much of the Bible that reading explains. What is right about it?"

Q4. Genuinely: what IS right about that reading? And then, what does Exodus 19:5 to 6 (coming next) start to do to it?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Affirm what deserves affirming: sacrifice really did precede the Levitical caste; a priestly people really is God's design; and the New Testament really will say startling things about the priesthood of all believers. The friend is standing on real texts, and note his actual position fairly: most Protestant churches keep ordained pastors and elders; what they deny is a distinct sacrificing priesthood. That stronger form is the one this study answers.

But two observations complicate the scaffolding theory even inside Genesis. First, pre-Sinai sacrifice was never a free-for-all: it was ordered, running through the heads of households (and, in a reading ancient in Jewish and Christian tradition, through the firstborn). Order is not scaffolding; it is part of the design. Second, hold the question of where the story is headed until the group reads Exodus 19. Tell the group honestly: the full answer to this friend takes most of this study, and we will not pretend to finish it tonight. Sessions 8 through 11 return to it with the New Testament open.

Build III: Sinai and the Calf

Read Exodus 19:5 to 6 aloud, slowly. Have the group underline "a kingdom of priests."

Q5. This is God's stated vocation for the entire nation, spoken before the Law is given. What is the condition attached at the front of the sentence?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

"If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant." The vocation is real and the condition is real. Note the word "keep": shamar again, the guard-word from the garden. The guard-word may deliberately recall Eden: Israel invited to keep the covenant as Adam was placed to keep the garden. Offer it as an echo the canon invites, not a statement Exodus makes.

Read Exodus 32:26 to 29, then Numbers 3:11 to 13.

Q6. After the golden calf, what happens to the question of who serves God as priest? Who is taken, and in place of whom?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The sons of Levi rally to Moses and are consecrated for the LORD's service ("Today you have ordained yourselves," 32:29, RSV2CE); later God formally takes the Levites "instead of every first-born" in Israel, for sanctuary service under Aaron's priesthood (priesthood proper belongs to Aaron and his sons, Numbers 3:10). In a venerable theological reading, which we adopt while naming it as a reading: the priestly vocation of the whole people is not revoked, but after the calf it is wounded, disciplined, and placed under guardianship. The tension between a priestly people and a set-apart priesthood within it is now live, and it will not resolve until this study reaches the New Testament.

DIG DEEPER

Exodus 19:22 and 19:24 mention "the priests" before the tribe of Levi has been set apart, and the text never tells us who they are. A common suggestion, ancient and modern, is that these are the firstborn, exercising the household priesthood of the patriarchal age; but the honest answer is that Scripture does not say, and faithful interpreters differ. Let the group feel the gap. Not every thread in the Old Testament gets tied off, and saying "we are not told" is a habit this study wants to build.

The Melchizedek Minute

Read Genesis 14:18 to 20 aloud once. Then say only this: "We are not going to talk about him tonight. Your Take-Home sheet will tell you what to do with him." Do not answer questions about Melchizedek. Change the subject with a smile. The silence is doing work.

Send

1. Adam's first vocation was to serve and to guard sacred space. Where in your ordinary week, your desk, your kitchen, your job site, could "serve and guard" become an act of worship this week?
2. Who has been a Job-like figure in your life, someone who, you later learned, was quietly offering prayer and sacrifice for you? What would it look like to become that person for someone else?

Live It This Week

- Each morning, before your feet hit the floor, offer the day to God in your own words: your work, your family, your frustrations. This is not a warm-up for the study; it is the priestly act of the baptized (the Church calls it a morning offering), and it is Exodus 19:6 in miniature.
- Once this week, out loud and alone if you like, pray for your household by name, interceding for each person the way Job offered for each of his children (Job 1:5).
- Reread Genesis 2 and 3 once, slowly, with a single question in mind: what here looks like a sanctuary?

Memory Verse

"and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Closing Prayer

Leader: Father, you placed our first parents in a garden to serve you and to guard what is holy, and you called a whole people to be a kingdom of priests. We confess that, like them, we have not kept the charge. Thank you for not revoking your call. As we walk through the Scriptures together these coming weeks, show us the Priest you always intended, and make our lives an offering pleasing to you. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader Reference Card: Session 1

Every passage used tonight, in order:

- Genesis 2:15 (Build I, read aloud)
- Numbers 3:7 to 8 (Build I, live discovery)
- Genesis 4:2 to 5 (Build II, read aloud)
- Genesis 8:20 (Build II, read aloud)
- Job 1:4 to 5 (Build II, read aloud)
- Genesis 12:7 to 8; Genesis 22 (Build II, leader reference only, if raised)
- Exodus 19:5 to 6 (Build III, read aloud; memory verse source)
- Exodus 32:26 to 29 (Build III, read aloud)
- Numbers 3:11 to 13 (Build III, read aloud)
- Exodus 19:22, 24 (Dig Deeper, leader reference)
- Genesis 14:18 to 20 (The Melchizedek Minute, read aloud once)
- Exodus 4:22 (leader background only: Israel as firstborn son)