

Session 2: A Kingdom Interrupted

A Kingdom of Priests: Priesthood in the New Covenant

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim

Last week the group watched Israel's priestly vocation narrow into a single tribe. Tonight they step inside the system God actually built: what a priest does (offers sacrifice, blesses, guards the holy), what the high priest wears (the names of Israel carried on his shoulders and over his heart), and what one day a year cost him (the Day of Atonement). Then, from inside the Old Testament itself, they discover the system's built-in limit, the one the Church will later name with Hebrews (CCC 1540): it repeats. Every year. Forever. The aim is reverence and hunger at the same time: this was God's gift, and God's gift was pointing past itself.

Catholic Touchstone

The Catechism teaches that the priesthood of Aaron and the service of the Levites was instituted for the proclamation of the word and for communion with God through sacrifices and prayer, and yet remained powerless to bring about salvation, needing to repeat its sacrifices ceaselessly (CCC 1540). The Church does not sneer at the Levitical priesthood; she sees in it a liturgy that the Church's own liturgy retains as a prefiguration of the New Covenant (CCC 1541 speaks of the Church seeing in that priesthood a prefiguring of the ordained ministry). Tonight is about honoring the shadow precisely as shadow.

What You Need to Know

The heart of the night is Exodus 28, and the detail your Take-Home already pointed the group toward: the vestments. The high priest wears two onyx stones on his shoulders, each engraved with six of the names of the sons of Israel (Exodus 28:9 to 12), and a breastpiece of judgment set with twelve stones, one for each tribe, worn "upon his heart, when he goes into the holy place, to bring them to continual remembrance before the LORD" (Exodus 28:29). Do not rush this. The high priest does not enter the sanctuary as a private person. He enters carrying everyone. Mediation is not a doctrine here; it is jewelry, weight, engraving. When someone in your group one day watches a priest at the altar and wonders what he is doing there, this is the picture underneath.

Second: the blessing. In Numbers 6:22 to 27 God dictates the words Aaron and his sons are to speak over Israel, and then adds the astonishing summary: "So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them." The priest's blessing is not a wish; it is God placing his own name on people through appointed men. Notice, and let the group notice, the word "keep" in the blessing itself ("The LORD bless you and keep you"): shamar, the guard-word from Eden. The priest asks God to do for Israel what Adam failed to do for the garden.

Third: the guarding itself. Numbers 18:1 to 7 assigns Aaron and the Levites to "attend" and "keep guard" over the sanctuary so that wrath falls on no one; the Levites camp around the tabernacle like a living wall (Numbers 1:53). Priesthood protects people from approaching holiness wrongly, not because God is petty, but because holiness is real. Leviticus 10:1 to 3 (Nadab and Abihu) is the sobering proof text if the group wants one; handle it in the Dig Deeper, honestly, as a hard text the Church reads within divine pedagogy.

Fourth: the Day of Atonement, Leviticus 16. One day a year, one man, behind the veil, with blood not his own, and first for his own sins (Leviticus 16:6, 11) before the people's. Then the refrain that gives the night its edge: "this shall be an everlasting statute for you... once in the year" (Leviticus 16:34). Once in the year, every year,

with no finish line in the text. The system works and never finishes. The group should discover that limitation from inside Leviticus, not from a New Testament spoiler; Hebrews will make the argument in Sessions 4 and 5, and it will land harder if the group has already felt the repetition for themselves.

Finally, the steelman. Sooner or later every serious reader meets the prophets' assault on sacrifice (Psalm 51:16 to 17, Isaiah 1:11 to 17, Hosea 6:6) and concludes that God never really wanted ritual priesthood at all: externals were always second-best to the heart. Build that case at full strength; it has real texts. The answer is also textual: Psalm 51 itself turns, two verses later, to "then you will delight in right sacrifices" (Psalm 51:19), and the same prophets who thundered against hollow offerings never called for the temple's abolition. The target of the critique is worship without obedience, not worship's form. God gave Israel both the altar and the prophets, and he was not arguing with himself.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Tonight deepens all three root systems from Session 1. The guard-duty of Eden (Thread B) becomes the Levites' literal job description in Numbers 18 and echoes inside the priestly blessing's "keep you." The firstborn thread (Thread C) stands behind the whole tribe of Levi, taken in the firstborn's place. And the "kingdom of priests" vocation (Thread D) now lives in tension with a professional priesthood inside the kingdom. Resist every temptation to resolve these forward into the New Testament tonight; the fulfillment sessions are coming, and the group's hunger is an asset.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Gregory the Great

St. Gregory, in his Pastoral Rule, lingers over the high priest's breastpiece and teaches, in substance, that it is a standing lesson for every shepherd of souls: the one who goes before God for others must carry them engraved on his heart, their judgments and their burdens pressed against his chest. For Gregory, Exodus 28 is not archaeology; it is a job description that still convicts. (A summary of Gregory's teaching rather than a single quotation.)

Pastoral Rule, Book 2

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Augustine

"A true sacrifice is every work done in order that we may cling to God in holy fellowship." Augustine's definition is the deep answer to tonight's steelman: the prophets and the altar were never enemies, because sacrifice was never merely the animal; it was the offered life the animal carried. What God rejected was the ritual emptied of the life.

City of God, Book 10, chapter 6

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Thomas teaches that the ceremonies of the Old Law were two things at once: true worship of God for their own time, and prefigurations of Christ. In substance: nothing in the Levitical system was fake, and nothing in it was final. Every sacrifice of the Law pointed beyond itself. That double honesty, real and provisional together, is exactly the posture this session wants the group to hold. (Summary of his teaching on the ceremonial precepts.)

Summa Theologiae I-II, q. 102

Catechism Connection

- CCC 1539 to 1540: the priesthood of Aaron and the Levites instituted within the people who are "a kingdom of priests"; a priesthood established to proclaim the word and offer sacrifice, yet powerless to bring about salvation, needing endless repetition.
- CCC 1541: the Church's liturgy sees in the priesthood of Aaron and the service of the Levites a prefiguring of the ordained ministry of the New Covenant.
- CCC 433: the high priest entering the Holy of Holies once a year with sacrificial blood, and the mercy seat as the place of God's forgiving presence.

Thread Watch (leader only)

- THREAD A (sealed guess): untouched tonight. If anyone mentions Melchizedek or bread and wine, smile and move on. Next week they get most of him; the sealed part stays sealed until Session 6.
- THREAD B (serve and guard): major development tonight. Numbers 18:1 to 7 guard duty; "keep you" (shamar) inside the priestly blessing. Name the Eden echo only AFTER the group spots the word "keep" themselves.
- THREAD C (the firstborn): light touch; the Levites stand in the firstborn's place (recalled from Session 1). One sentence, no more.
- THREAD D (kingdom of priests): the tension sharpens tonight; a priestly people now watches one man enter for them. Do not resolve it.

Session Goals

1. The group can name the priest's three core works from the texts themselves: sacrifice, blessing, guarding.
2. The group discovers the names on the shoulders and over the heart in Exodus 28 and articulates what that says about mediation.
3. The group finds shamar ("keep") inside the priestly blessing and connects it to Eden without being told.
4. The group feels the Day of Atonement's "once in the year" as the system's own confession of incompleteness, discovered from Leviticus, not imported from Hebrews.
5. The prophetic-critique steelman is built at full strength and answered from Psalm 51 itself.

Timed Plan (90 minutes)

- 0:00 Welcome and opening prayer (5 min)
- 0:05 Win questions (10 min)
- 0:15 Build I: The vestments, carrying the people (20 min)
- 0:35 Build II: The blessing and the guard (20 min)
- 0:55 Build III: The Day of Atonement and the steelman (25 min)
- 1:20 Send questions (5 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 (Nadab and Abihu), read Numbers 18:1 to 7 yourself with a one-sentence summary instead of group work, and take one Send question instead of two. Never cut the Psalm 51:19 discovery or the "once in the year" moment.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Leader: Father, you taught your people to draw near to you through priest and altar, and every gift you gave them pointed to a greater gift. As we walk through the sanctuary tonight, give us the reverence of those who remove their shoes, and the hunger of those who know the story is not finished. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win

1. What is something you own that carries names on it, a ring, a bracelet, a tattoo, a photo in your wallet? Why do we carry names on our bodies?
2. Has anyone ever gone somewhere you could not go, and gone there for you? (A parent at a hard meeting, a friend at a hospital desk, a lawyer in a courtroom.) What did it mean that they went in your place?

Build I: Carrying the People

Read Exodus 28:9 to 12 and 28:15 to 21, 29 aloud, divided around the room.

Q1. Slow down and inventory: what exactly is written on the high priest's shoulders? What is set over his heart? And Exodus 28:29 gives the purpose in one phrase: what is it?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Twelve names of the sons of Israel: six engraved on each shoulder stone, and twelve stones over his heart on the breastpiece. Purpose: "to bring them to continual remembrance before the LORD." The high priest never enters as a private individual; he physically carries the whole people into the presence of God. Mediation, before it is ever a doctrine, is a weight worn on the body.

Q2. Why shoulders and heart, do you think? What do those two places on a body suggest about what a priest is for?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Let the group work; there is no single right answer, and say so. The classic reading, cherished by pastors for centuries (St. Gregory the Great built a whole chapter of advice to clergy on the breastpiece), is strength and love: the people are carried as a burden on the shoulders and as beloved names on the heart. A priest who carries people only as burden, or only as sentiment, is carrying them wrong.

Build II: The Blessing and the Guard

Read Numbers 6:22 to 27 aloud, slowly.

Q3. Whose words are these, originally? And what does verse 27 say actually happens when the priests speak them?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

God's own words, dictated to Moses for Aaron and his sons. Verse 27: "So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them." The priest's blessing is not a pious wish; it is God placing his own name on his people through appointed men, and God binding himself: "I will bless them." Appointed human lips, divine action. Keep that pattern; the whole study runs on it.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Say: "There is one word inside this blessing that we have met before, back on our very first night, in a garden. Find it." Give them a minute with the text.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

"Keep": "The LORD bless you and keep you." The Hebrew is shamar, the guard-word of Genesis 2:15 and Numbers 3. Adam was placed to keep the garden and failed; now the priest asks God himself to keep the people. Only confirm the connection after someone finds the word.

Read Numbers 18:1 to 7.

Q4. What is the Levites' assignment around the tent, and what is it for? (Verse 5 states the purpose.)

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

They attend to the sanctuary and keep guard over it, "that there be wrath no more upon the people of Israel." Priesthood is protective. By assignment, and by encampment (Numbers 1:53), the Levites stand between the people and the holy things like a living wall, not because God is hostile, but because holiness is real and approaching it wrongly is deadly. Guarding the holy is the Eden job, reassigned.

DIG DEEPER

Leviticus 10:1 to 3: Nadab and Abihu offer "unholy fire" and die before the LORD. This is a genuinely hard text; do not domesticate it and do not apologize for it. Read within the Church's understanding of divine pedagogy (CCC 53), this hard text can be understood this way: at the founding of the cult, God teaches with terrible clarity that worship is on his terms, not ours, and that the priesthood exists precisely to protect people from casual contact with what is holy. It is honest to say that a text like this remains difficult, and that reverence, not full comprehension, is the response Scripture asks for here.

Build III: Once in the Year

Set the scene for Leviticus 16 in your own words (one day a year, one man, behind the veil), then read Leviticus 16:2, 16:6, 16:11 to 16, 16:21 to 22, and 16:29 to 30 divided around the room.

Q5. Before the high priest can atone for the people, what must he do first (verses 6 and 11)? What does that tell you about him?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

He must offer a bull "for himself, and for his house": atonement for his own sins first. The mediator himself needs mediation. The system is honest about its own personnel; every priest who ever entered that room was also a sinner who needed the room.

Now read Leviticus 16:34 aloud, and read it twice.

Q6. "Once in the year." An everlasting statute. Sit with the math: what does this system never say? What is missing from it that you would expect a rescue plan to have?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

It never says "finished." There is no last Day of Atonement on the calendar, no verse where the repetition ends. God truly gave and honored this worship, yet by its own design it never completes (that it could not by itself take away sins is the Church's judgment, reading with Hebrews: CCC 1540); next year the blood must flow again, and the year after. Let the group feel this from Leviticus alone. Do not quote the New Testament tonight; when they meet the Letter to the Hebrews in two weeks, they will recognize this observation as its opening move, and it will be their own.

STEELMAN: BUILD IT UP. Say it at full strength: "A serious reader of the prophets says: God told you himself what he thinks of all this. Psalm 51: sacrifice you do not desire; a broken and contrite heart you will not despise. Isaiah 1: your offerings are an abomination, wash yourselves, seek justice. Hosea 6:6: I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice. Ritual priesthood was always the concession; the heart was always the point. Christianity should have priests of the heart and nothing else. Feel how much Scripture is on that side."

Q7. What is right in that reading? Then turn to Psalm 51 itself and read verses 16 to 17, and then verse 19. What does verse 19 do to the theory?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

What is right: God truly rejects worship emptied of obedience and love, and says so with violence. The heart truly is the point. Never blunt that.

But Psalm 51 refuses the either-or. Two verses after "sacrifice you do not desire," the same psalm prays "then you will delight in right sacrifices... then bulls will be offered upon your altar." The prophets attack hollow worship, not worship's form; the same Isaiah who thunders in chapter 1 sees the LORD enthroned in the temple in chapter 6 and receives cleansing from its altar. God gave Israel both the altar and the prophets, and he was not arguing with himself. The question the Old Testament leaves open is not whether sacrifice, but what sacrifice could ever carry a whole heart. Hold that question; it is the door the next sessions walk through.

Send

1. The high priest carried names on his shoulders and over his heart. Whose names are you carrying right now, and where, as burden, or as love, or both?
2. Where in your life do you catch yourself offering God externals (attendance, routine, the minimum) with the heart parked outside? What would "right sacrifice" look like there this week?

Live It This Week

- Write down the names of five people you are responsible for or responsible to, and carry the list in your pocket or phone case all week. Pray for them by name once a day. You are practicing Exodus 28.
- At one Mass or one prayer time this week, when you catch your heart drifting into routine, stop and pray Psalm 51:17 from memory: "a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

- Ask God's blessing over one person out loud this week using the words of Numbers 6:24 to 26. Parents, this is made for your children.

Memory Verse

"The LORD bless you and keep you: The LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: The LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace."

Numbers 6:24 to 26 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Leader: Lord God, you taught Israel that no one climbs to you uninvited, and then you built the way down yourself: an altar, a blessing, a man carrying twelve names over his heart. Teach us reverence for everything you gave, and make us restless for everything it promised. A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader Reference Card: Session 2

Every passage used tonight, in order:

- Exodus 28:9 to 12; 28:15 to 21; 28:29 (Build I, read aloud)
- Numbers 6:22 to 27 (Build II, read aloud; live discovery of "keep"; memory verse source)
- Genesis 2:15; Numbers 3:7 to 8 (Build II, leader reference for the shamar echo)
- Numbers 18:1 to 7 (Build II, read aloud)
- Leviticus 10:1 to 3 (Dig Deeper)
- Leviticus 16:2, 6, 11 to 16, 21 to 22, 29 to 30 (Build III, read aloud)
- Leviticus 16:34 (Build III, read twice)
- Psalm 51:16 to 17, 19 (Build III, steelman and answer)
- Isaiah 1:11 to 17; Hosea 6:6 (steelman, leader reference; Isaiah 6:1 to 7 as leader backup)