

In Their Midst

Exodus: From Slavery to Covenant Presence

Session 4. That You May Know the Lord

Reading: Exodus 7:1-10:29

Part One

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim

The group traces the repeated pattern of the plagues and discovers how judgment reveals the Lord while exposing Pharaoh's resistance.

Catholic Touchstone

This session touches God's sovereign justice, the reality of human freedom, the exposure of idolatry, and the merciful purpose of divine warnings.

The plague narrative is not a contest between nearly equal powers. Through repeated signs, warnings, distinctions, and judgments, the Lord makes himself known to Egypt and Israel. At the same time, Pharaoh's responses reveal a heart that wants relief without surrender. Help the group stay close to the whole textual pattern, especially when discussing the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Scripture affirms both God's sovereignty and Pharaoh's genuine responsibility.

What You Need to Know

A carefully ordered narrative

The first nine plagues form three groups of three. In the first plague of each group, Moses meets Pharaoh in the morning. In the second, Moses is told to go to Pharaoh. The third arrives without a recorded warning. This pattern helps the group see deliberate revelation rather than a random series of disasters.

- First group: blood, frogs, gnats.
- Second group: flies, pestilence, boils.
- Third group: hail, locusts, darkness.

The purpose statements matter

The narrative repeatedly explains why these signs occur. Egypt will know that the Lord is God, Pharaoh is confronted with the Lord's uniqueness, Israel learns that the Lord distinguishes his people, and God's name is proclaimed through the earth. Judgment serves revelation, even when its recipient refuses to respond.

Read every hardening statement

Do not isolate one sentence. The text describes Pharaoh's heart as hard or hardened, says that Pharaoh hardens his own heart, and says that the Lord hardens it. Pharaoh repeatedly receives warnings, observes fulfilled signs, asks for intercession, receives relief, and then renews his refusal. Catholic teaching does not permit the conclusion that God directly causes Pharaoh's sin or removes all responsibility from him. God's judicial hardening can be understood as his confirming or permitting the

course Pharaoh freely and persistently embraces, while incorporating even that rebellion into his saving plan.

Avoid speculative one-to-one identifications

The plagues plainly expose Egypt's powerless religious order and Pharaoh's false claim to ultimate authority. Some modern charts assign each plague to one particular Egyptian deity, but many of those correspondences are disputed or overly neat. The session does not need them. The biblical contrast between the Lord and Egypt's powers is already clear.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Judgment as a reversal of creation

Genesis presents waters, land, animals, light, and human life as ordered gifts under God's word. Exodus shows those same domains becoming instruments of judgment against an order built on oppression. The created world is not divine. It answers to its Creator.

Israel as God's firstborn

The Lord has already called Israel his firstborn in Exodus 4:22-23. The conflict with Pharaoh therefore concerns worship, sonship, and rightful belonging, not merely political relocation. This prepares the group for the climactic judgment and Passover in the next session.

Measured judgment

Wisdom 11:15-16 later reflects on Egypt's punishment and observes that people can be disciplined through the very kinds of creatures involved in their sin. The Church can therefore read the plagues as morally meaningful judgments, not divine outbursts without purpose.

The plagues echoed in Revelation

Revelation 8 and 16 reuse plague imagery as Christ brings history toward final judgment. The echoes do not make every detail identical. They show that the Exodus becomes a biblical pattern for God's victory over oppressive powers, his summons to repentance, and the deliverance of his people.

Voices of the Church

Read these aloud where they land. Each is either a direct citation or an honest summary, labelled as such.

St. Clement of Rome, first century

St. Clement recalls Pharaoh and his forces as examples of people who hardened themselves through stubbornness and were consequently judged. This is a summary of his use of the Exodus account.

First Letter to the Corinthians 51.3-5.

How this is cited. The cited passage explicitly connects Pharaoh's opposition and destruction with his hardened, rebellious disposition. The wording here is a summary rather than a quotation.

For the group. Pharaoh's story warns us that repeated resistance can become a settled posture of the heart.

St. John Chrysostom, c. 347-407

St. John Chrysostom teaches that God did not make Pharaoh evil. God's patience and mighty works brought Pharaoh's already chosen resistance into the open, while displaying divine power for the good of others. This is a summary of his interpretation.

Homilies on Romans 16, on Romans 9:17-18.

How this is cited. The homily directly addresses Paul's use of Pharaoh and rejects the idea that God created Pharaoh's wickedness. The wording is an honest summary.

For the group. God's patience is not approval of sin. It gives room for repentance and reveals what our choices are becoming.

St. John Damascene, d. c. 749

St. John Damascene distinguishes divine foreknowledge from divine causation. God knows human choices without being the author of the evil freely chosen by rational creatures. This is a summary of his teaching.

An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith 2.30.

How this is cited. The cited chapter explicitly teaches that foreknowledge does not cause every human act and that moral choices lie within human freedom. Its application to Pharaoh is ours, while the doctrinal distinction is the saint's.

For the group. We do not have to weaken either God's sovereignty or human responsibility when reading Pharaoh's story.

Catechism Connection

The Catechism says

CCC 304. Scripture often attributes actions directly to God to confess his sovereign lordship, without always naming the created causes through which his providence works.

CCC 311. God is in no way the cause of moral evil. He permits it while mysteriously bringing good from it.

CCC 1730. God created the human person as rational and free, able to initiate and control deliberate actions.

CCC 1037. God predestines no one to hell. Final separation from him involves a willful turning away that persists to the end.

CCC 2112-2114. Idolatry treats created realities as divine and rejects the unique lordship owed to God alone.

Thread Watch

Thread Watch

Why God brings Israel out (develop). Track the repeated purpose clauses. Israel's departure will reveal the Lord, spread his name, and free his people for his service.

Fear of God versus fear of rulers (develop). Notice how Pharaoh's servants begin to respond to the Lord's warning even while Pharaoh continues to resist.

God dwelling among his people (develop). The Lord distinguishes the land where his people dwell, showing protective presence before the tabernacle is built.

Mediators of deliverance (develop). Moses speaks God's word, stretches out his hand, and intercedes when Pharaoh asks for relief. Keep the focus on God acting through his appointed servant.

Deliverance through water (hold). Do not advance this thread tonight. The sea will return to the foreground in Session 6.

The sealed guess (hold). Do not reopen the guesses. Let the repeated language of knowing, serving, and belonging continue to shape expectations until Session 8.

Objection Bench

Leader only. Do not raise these unless someone in the room does.

If God hardens Pharaoh's heart, Pharaoh appears to be punished for a refusal God caused.

Keep all the textual evidence together. Pharaoh chooses refusal, reneges after relief, ignores fulfilled warnings, and hardens his own heart. The Lord's hardening language affirms sovereign judgment, but Catholic doctrine excludes God as the author of Pharaoh's sin. God can permit, judge, and confirm a freely chosen course while using it to reveal his power and accomplish deliverance.

The plagues may have involved natural processes, so they need not reveal divine action.

A proposed physical process would not by itself answer the narrative's theological claims. Exodus emphasizes announced timing, escalation, distinctions, cessation through intercession, and stated purposes. Catholic faith does not require us to deny created causes. It does require us to take seriously the text's claim that creation and history remain under God's providence.

Session Goals

1. Help the group identify the ordered pattern of the first nine plagues.
2. Trace the repeated statements explaining what the plagues are meant to reveal.
3. Compare Pharaoh's words, choices, temporary concessions, and repeated reversals.
4. Hold God's sovereignty and Pharaoh's genuine moral responsibility together without making God the author of sin.
5. Invite participants to recognize the danger of seeking relief from God without surrendering to God.

Time Note

Planned for 75-90 Minutes

Allow 5 minutes for prayer, 10 minutes for Win, 15 minutes for selected readings, 45 to 50 minutes for Build, 10 minutes for Send and weekly practices, and 5 minutes for the closing prayer and memory verse.

If you are running long, cut in this order.

1. Cut the Dig Deeper portion of Question 4 first.
2. Then shorten Question 6 by having one person report the psalm's main emphasis.
3. If needed, discuss only one of the two Send questions aloud and invite silent reflection on the other.

Part Two

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Pray together

Lord God, you hear the oppressed, confront what enslaves, and make your name known. Send your Holy Spirit as we read. Give us humility before your word, courage to face our own resistance, and hearts ready to obey when you speak. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win

Open questions. No wrong answers. Let everyone speak before you move on.

W1. When have repeated reminders helped you finally notice something you had been missing?

W2. What usually makes it difficult for someone to admit that he or she is wrong?

Keep this warm and personal. Do not connect anyone's answer to Pharaoh for them.

Read

Read aloud

Ask everyone to have read Exodus 7:1-10:29 before the session. During the meeting, use four readers for Exodus 7:1-5, 7:14-25, 8:16-19, 8:25-32, 9:13-21, 9:27-35, and 10:1-3, 10:21-29. Ask the group to keep the full passage open for comparison.

Build

Numbered inductive questions. Ask, wait, let the group work the text. The ANSWER boxes are for you to share after the discussion, not before it.

What the signs reveal

1. Scan Exodus 7 through 10 for statements containing words such as know, show, name, or distinguish. According to those statements, what are the plagues meant to accomplish?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The signs reveal that the Lord alone is God, that he is present and active, that he distinguishes his people, and that his power and name are to be known beyond Egypt. The text presents the judgments as acts of revelation as well as punishment.

Dig Deeper

Compare Pharaoh's words in Exodus 5:2 with the purpose statements in Exodus 7:5 and 7:17. How is the narrative answering his original challenge?

2. List the first nine plagues in order. What repeated pattern do you notice in the instructions that introduce each group of three?

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. Simply list the plagues in order.

Ground. Look at how the first, fourth, and seventh begin, then compare the second, fifth, and eighth.

Depth. Ask what this literary order communicates about the difference between judgment and chaos.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The plagues are blood, frogs, gnats, flies, pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness. Plagues one, four, and seven begin with a morning encounter. Plagues two, five, and eight begin with an instruction to go to Pharaoh. Plagues three, six, and nine arrive without a recorded warning. The ordered structure shows controlled and purposeful judgment.

3. Where does the Lord make a distinction between Egypt and Israel? What does that distinction reveal?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The Lord protects the land where his people dwell during the flies, spares Israel's livestock from the pestilence, and gives Israel light during Egypt's darkness. These distinctions reveal his knowledge of, presence with, and authority to protect his people in the midst of judgment.

4. Trace what happens to the magicians from Exodus 7:11 through 9:11. How does their position change?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

They initially imitate some signs, though they do not reverse them or free Egypt. At the gnats they fail and acknowledge the finger of God. By the boils they cannot even stand before Moses. Their diminishing ability exposes the limits of Egypt's spiritual and political establishment.

Dig Deeper

Why is the ability to imitate a harmful sign different from the ability to remove it, heal its effects, or deliver the people?

The exposure of Pharaoh's heart

5. Follow Pharaoh's words and offers in Exodus 8:8-32, 9:27-35, and 10:8-29. What does he concede, and what does he continue trying to control?

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. List each concession Pharaoh offers.

Ground. Ask what he holds back every time.

Depth. Consider how partial obedience can function as a refusal while still sounding like agreement.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Pharaoh asks for prayer, admits sin, and offers limited permission to worship. Yet he repeatedly tries to control where Israel worships, who may go, and what they may take. Once relief comes, he reverses himself. He wants the consequences removed without yielding his claim over Israel.

Live discovery

Without introducing the passage beforehand, ask pairs to find and read the assigned text. Have them underline what God does and circle any reference to God's servants or God's word.

Let them find it. Psalm 105:26-36

6. A later biblical prayer retells the plagues. What details does it emphasize, and what does that emphasis suggest Israel was meant to remember?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The psalm emphasizes that God sends Moses and Aaron, gives his word, performs signs, and acts throughout Egypt. Israel remembers the plagues chiefly as the Lord's purposeful saving action through servants who obey his command, not merely as a catalog of disasters.

Build the textual case

7. Before considering the hardest objection, build the strongest case you can from Exodus 7 through 10 that Pharaoh is acting knowingly and responsibly.

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. Find one place where Pharaoh changes his mind after receiving relief.

Ground. Compare Pharaoh's response with the response of the servants who shelter from the hail.

Depth. Consider how knowledge, warning, and repeated choice increase rather than lessen responsibility.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Pharaoh receives repeated warnings, sees predictions fulfilled, requests intercession, experiences relief, and sometimes acknowledges that he has sinned. He then chooses renewed refusal. Some passages explicitly say that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. His servants begin to heed the Lord's warning, showing that a different response remains possible.

Press the hardening question

8. How should we respond to the claim that God's hardening of Pharaoh makes God responsible for Pharaoh's sin?

Build then press

The strongest form of the objection. Exodus does not merely say that God foreknew Pharaoh's resistance. It repeatedly says that God would harden or did harden Pharaoh's heart. If this language means what it appears to mean, God determined Pharaoh's refusal and then punished Pharaoh and Egypt for the very refusal God caused. Appeals to Pharaoh's responsibility cannot solve the problem if divine causation made another choice impossible.

Answering from the text. The objection rightly insists that the hardening language cannot be erased, but it must be read with the entire narrative. Exodus also depicts Pharaoh hardening his own heart, making calculated reversals after relief, ignoring evidence, and receiving genuine warnings. God's sovereignty governs the conflict, yet God is not the author of moral evil. One theological account, not a defined teaching, understands the hardening judicially: God permits Pharaoh's freely chosen resistance, withdraws an undeserved relief he was never owed, and confirms that rebellion within a judgment that serves God's saving purpose. Offer it as one way of holding the text together, not as the Church's settled explanation. Divine foreknowledge and providence do not transform Pharaoh's evil choice into an evil caused by God.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The text affirms both truths: the Lord sovereignly judges and directs history, and Pharaoh knowingly resists. Catholic doctrine rules out an interpretation in which God directly causes Pharaoh's sin. The mystery should not be reduced by deleting either God's sovereignty or Pharaoh's responsibility.

9. What signs of warning, patience, restraint, or mercy can you find within these scenes of judgment?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

God repeatedly warns before acting, announces what will happen, allows time for people to respond, distinguishes Israel, honors Moses' intercession, removes plagues, and warns Egyptians to shelter from the hail. These mercies do not cancel justice. They show that the judgments expose the heart while leaving real opportunities to heed God's word.

From recognition to surrender

10. By the end of Exodus 10, what does Pharaoh appear to know about the Lord, and what does he still refuse to do?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Pharaoh has seen the Lord's power, admitted wrongdoing, asked for prayer, and watched divine warnings come true. Yet he still refuses lasting obedience and continues to claim authority over Israel's worship. The narrative distinguishes recognizing divine power from surrendering to divine lordship.

Send

Open questions. Let these land in silence if they need to.

S1. Where are you most tempted to ask God for relief while still keeping control of the terms?

S2. What warning or invitation from God might you need to answer before resistance becomes a habit?

Live It This Week

Practices

1. Make an honest examination of conscience focused on delayed obedience. Name one command, responsibility, or needed reconciliation that you have repeatedly postponed.
2. Pray Psalm 95 on three days this week. When you reach its warning about hardening the heart, pause and ask for the grace to respond promptly to God.
3. Choose one concrete act of surrender. Make the apology, end the dishonest practice, attend Confession if needed, or complete the act of obedience you have been bargaining around.
4. When asking God to remove a difficulty, add this prayer: Lord, do not only change my circumstances. Change my heart and teach me to obey.

Scripture Memory

Exodus 7:5

"The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch forth my hand upon Egypt and bring out the sons of Israel from among them."

Exodus 7:5

Closing Prayer

Pray together

Almighty God, you alone are Lord. Thank you for speaking before judgment and for giving sinners room to repent. Deliver us from pride, bargaining, and delayed obedience. Soften what has grown hard in us, teach us to receive your mercy, and make our lives proclaim your name. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Part Three

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order. Print this page and keep it in front of you.

Primary text

- **Exodus 7:1-10:29** The first nine plagues, their purpose statements, and Pharaoh's responses.

Earlier Exodus connections

- **Exodus 4:22-23** Israel is called God's firstborn.
- **Exodus 5:2** Pharaoh challenges the identity and authority of the Lord.

Old Testament roots and canonical reflection

- **Genesis 1:1-31** Creation ordered by God's word.
- **Psalms 95:7-11** The warning against hardening the heart.
- **Psalms 105:26-36** A biblical retelling of the plagues.
- **Wisdom 11:15-16** Judgment corresponding to the instruments of sin.

New Testament echoes

- **Romans 9:14-18** St. Paul's use of Pharaoh in discussing God's freedom and mercy.
- **Revelation 8:6-13** Plague imagery in the trumpet judgments.
- **Revelation 16:1-11** Plague imagery, judgment, and continued refusal to repent.

Terms

- **kabed.** A Hebrew root associated with being heavy or weighty, used in descriptions of Pharaoh's hardened heart.
- **chazaq.** A Hebrew root associated with being strong or firm, also used in the hardening language.

Catechism

- CCC 304. Scripture confesses God's lordship while not always naming secondary causes.
- CCC 311. God is never the cause of moral evil.
- CCC 1730. Human beings possess genuine rational freedom.
- CCC 1037. God predestines no one to hell.
- CCC 2112-2114. Idolatry gives created realities the worship due to God.