

In Their Midst

Exodus: From Slavery to Covenant Presence

Session 8. A Kingdom of Priests

Reading: Exodus 19:1-20:21

Part One

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim

The group discovers that God brings Israel to himself, gives the people a covenant identity, and teaches redeemed people how to live.

Catholic Touchstone

This session touches covenant belonging, the moral law, God's holiness, the common priesthood of the baptized, and and the divinely appointed ministry that participates in, and never rivals, the one mediation of Christ.

Israel has been freed from Pharaoh, fed in the wilderness, and carried to Sinai. Now the purpose of the exodus comes into sharper focus. God has not merely brought Israel out of a place. He has brought the people to himself. Before giving a commandment, he reminds them of his saving action and names their covenant vocation. The commandments then show how a redeemed people lives in relationship with God and neighbor. Tonight the group will also open the guesses sealed in Session 1 and compare them, without embarrassment or grading, with God's own words in Exodus 19.

What You Need to Know

Grace comes before command

Keep the order of the text in view. God first says what he has done for Israel, then names what Israel is called to be, and only afterward speaks the commandments. Israel does not obey in order to make the exodus happen. The people are taught to obey because God has already delivered them and brought them into covenant relationship.

A treasured possession within a universal claim

In Exodus 19:5, God calls Israel his treasured possession while also declaring that all the earth is his. Election is therefore not a claim that God belongs only to Israel. It is a covenant vocation within God's lordship over every nation. Help the group resist turning this identity into either ethnic superiority or a merely private spiritual privilege.

A priestly people and distinct mediators

The whole nation is called a kingdom of priests in Exodus 19:6, yet the same chapter distinguishes Moses, Aaron, the priests, and the people. Corporate priestly identity and differentiated ministry are present together rather than canceling each other. This becomes important when the New Testament applies Israel's priestly language to the Church.

The commandments belong to the covenant

The Decalogue is introduced by the Lord's identity and saving action. In the Catholic numbering the first three commands order Israel's worship of God, including the Sabbath, while the remaining seven protect the neighbor: family, life, marriage, property, truth, and rightly ordered desire. The traditional

numbering of the commandments has varied among Christian traditions. The Catholic numbering follows the division associated with St. Augustine, while preserving the full biblical text.

Fear that drives away and fear that keeps us near

Exodus 20:18-21 sounds paradoxical. Moses tells the people not to fear, then says that the fear of God should remain before them. Let the context supply the distinction. They need not flee as if God's purpose were their destruction, but they do need reverence that takes his holiness and commands seriously.

Opening the sealed guesses

Have the sealed responses from Session 1 ready and keep them closed until Build Question 4. This is not a prediction contest. Some answers may emphasize freedom, worship, nationhood, obedience, safety, or the promised land. Receive every response warmly, then let Exodus 19:4-6 refine the whole room's understanding.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

A holy people chosen for covenant vocation

Deuteronomy 7:6-9 echoes Sinai's language of a holy people and treasured possession, and goes on to state the basis explicitly: Israel's election rests in God's love and his oath to the fathers, not in national greatness. The covenant identity given at Sinai is therefore gift and calling together.

The law written on the heart

Jeremiah 31:31-34 promises a new covenant in which God's law will be written within his people. The promise does not portray holiness as life without God's will. It points toward an interior transformation in which his people know him and receive forgiveness.

Christ fulfills rather than abolishes

In Matthew 5:17, Jesus declares that he has come not to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them. Catholic teaching therefore distinguishes the enduring moral truth expressed in the Decalogue from the ritual and juridical provisions whose covenantal purpose reaches fulfillment in Christ.

Sinai's titles given to the Church

In 1 Peter 2:4-10, the apostle applies the language of a chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, and God's own people to those gathered around Christ. The Church receives this identity through Christ in order to offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim God's saving deeds. This common priesthood does not erase the ministerial priesthood. The two participate in Christ's one priesthood in distinct ways and are ordered to one another.

Voices of the Church

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

St. Justin Martyr, d. c. 165

Summary of his teaching: St. Justin argues that those who have believed through the name of Jesus, stripped of their sins as of filthy garments, are the true high priestly race of God, since God receives sacrifice only through his priests and a pure offering is now made among the nations.

Dialogue with Trypho 116.

How this is cited. Summary of St. Justin's argument in the cited chapter, not a quotation. The chapter applies Zechariah's vision of the high priest to Christians and leads on to his account of the Eucharist as the pure offering foretold by Malachi.

For the group. Sinai's priestly identity is not left behind. Ask what it means that a whole people, and not only its ministers, is called priestly.

St. Augustine, 354-430

St. Augustine begins the Confessions by acknowledging that God made us for himself and that the human heart remains restless until it rests in him.

Confessions 1.1.1.

How this is cited. This is a faithful summary of the well-attested opening of the *Confessions*. Wording varies among English translations.

For the group. The deepest destination of deliverance is not merely a better circumstance, but communion with God.

St. John Paul II, 1920-2005

St. John Paul II teaches that through Baptism the lay faithful share in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and kingly mission. Their whole life becomes the place where this baptismal dignity is exercised.

Christifideles Laici 14.

How this is cited. This is a summary of the baptismal participation described in *Christifideles Laici* 14, not a direct quotation.

For the group. A royal priesthood is lived through worship, witness, holiness, work, relationships, and service.

Catechism Connection

The Catechism says

CCC 2056. The word Decalogue means ten words, and these words are revealed within God's covenant with his people.

CCC 2057. The Decalogue must first be understood in the context of the exodus, God's great liberating act at the heart of the Old Covenant.

CCC 2060-2061. The gift of the commandments belongs within the covenant, and moral life is a response to the Lord's loving initiative.

CCC 2062-2063. The commandments express what belonging to God in covenant implies, and God speaks them in the first person to the whole people and to each person.

CCC 2066. The division and numbering of the commandments have varied, and the Catholic tradition follows the division associated with St. Augustine.

CCC 1546. Through Baptism and anointing by the Holy Spirit, the faithful share in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and kingly office.

CCC 1547. The common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood differ essentially while remaining ordered to one another within Christ's one priesthood.

Thread Watch

Thread Watch

Why God brings Israel out (resolve). Open the sealed guesses and let Exodus 19:4-6 supply the clearest answer so far. God brings Israel to himself and gives the redeemed people a covenant vocation.

The sealed guess (resolve). Open the Session 1 responses during Build Question 4. Celebrate what participants noticed, then allow the text to enlarge or correct each answer.

Fear of God versus fear of rulers (develop). Use Exodus 20:18-21 to distinguish terror that retreats from God from reverence that resists sin and remains attentive to him.

God dwelling among his people (develop). The people have been brought to God's mountain, but holiness, boundaries, and mediation show that full covenant presence still requires an ordered way of approach.

Mediators of deliverance (develop). Moses moves between God and the people, and the frightened people explicitly ask him to mediate God's word.

Deliverance through water (hold). Do not reopen the Red Sea and Baptism discovery at length. Briefly recall that the people receiving their vocation are the people God has already brought through the sea.

Where is the lamb? (hold). The Passover remains behind Israel's redeemed identity, but the lamb thread does not advance directly in this passage.

Objection Bench

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

The commandments make biblical religion a system of earning acceptance by rule keeping.

The narrative order says otherwise. God rescues Israel, bears the people to himself, and gives them an identity before speaking the commandments. Obedience is the covenant response to prior grace, not the cause of the exodus.

If the whole people is a kingdom of priests, a distinct ministerial priesthood must contradict the text.

Exodus 19 holds corporate priestly identity and differentiated mediation together. It names the whole nation priestly while also distinguishing Moses, Aaron, priests, and people. The New Testament and Catholic doctrine preserve both realities.

The fear and boundaries at Sinai portray God as wanting distance rather than relationship.

God has explicitly brought Israel to himself, so distance cannot be the whole point. The boundaries teach that communion with the holy God is a gift received on his terms, not something seized or treated casually.

Catholics dropped the commandment against graven images and renumbered the rest to cover it up.

The full text of Exodus 20 stands in every Catholic Bible, prohibition of images included, and the Catechism treats it directly at 2129 to 2132. The numbering has varied among Christians since long before the Reformation: the Catholic division follows St. Augustine, other traditions divide differently, and every division keeps all ten words. On images themselves, hold the question until Session 10 rather than settling it tonight. The same book that forbids images at Sinai will command two of them for the mercy seat, and the group should find that for themselves.

Session Goals

1. Identify the saving action that precedes Israel's covenant obligations.
2. Discover from Exodus 19:4-6 why God has brought Israel out of Egypt.
3. Open and honestly resolve the sealed Session 1 guesses in light of the text.
4. Describe the identity and vocation expressed by treasured possession, kingdom of priests, and holy nation.
5. Read the Decalogue as the way of life given to a redeemed covenant people.
6. Recognize that the common priesthood of God's people and differentiated ministry coexist in Scripture.
7. Distinguish servile terror from reverent fear in Exodus 20:18-21.

Time Note

Planned for 75-90 Minutes

Allow 3 minutes for prayer, 9 minutes for Win, 13 minutes for the reading, 48 to 53 minutes for Build, including the sealed-guess ritual, 10 minutes for Send and Live It This Week, and 3 minutes for the closing prayer and memory verse.

If you are running long, cut in this order.

1. Cut the Dig Deeper discussion under Question 7 first.
2. Shorten Question 6 by asking for only two details from the theophany.
3. Discuss only one of the two Send questions aloud, inviting participants to keep the other for personal prayer.
4. If necessary, summarize Question 11 after one or two responses rather than opening a second round of discussion.

Part Two

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Pray together

Holy God, you hear your people, deliver them from slavery, and bring them to yourself. Give us reverence without hiding, freedom without presumption, and hearts ready to hear your word. Teach us who you have called your people to be and how redeemed people are meant to live. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win

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

W1. When have you received a responsibility that also made you feel trusted or valued?

W2. What is one rule, boundary, or routine that you understand better now than when you first encountered it?

Keep this warm and personal. Do not turn either question into a debate about laws or authority.

Read

Read aloud

Use three readers. Reader one reads Exodus 19:1-15, reader two reads Exodus 19:16-25, and reader three reads Exodus 20:1-21. Ask everyone else to mark repeated words, identity statements, commands, sensory details, and movements toward or away from God.

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.

Brought to God

1. According to Exodus 19:1-4, where has Israel arrived, what has God already done, and what image does he use to describe it?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Israel has reached the wilderness of Sinai and camped before the mountain. God reminds the people that they saw what he did to Egypt. He describes carrying them on eagles' wings and bringing them to himself. The emphasis falls on God's action rather than Israel's strength.

2. Look closely at the final words of Exodus 19:4. How do those words deepen the purpose of the exodus beyond escape from Egypt?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The destination is personal and covenantal. God says that he brought Israel to himself. Freedom from Pharaoh is necessary, but it is not the final purpose. Israel is liberated for belonging to God, worship, holiness, and life in his presence.

Dig Deeper

Compare this destination with the repeated demand that Pharaoh release the people so that they may serve or worship the Lord. What has the journey revealed about the difference between slavery to Pharaoh and belonging to God?

3. In Exodus 19:5-6, what does God ask of Israel, what identities does he give them, and what phrase keeps their election from becoming a claim of superiority over everyone else?

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. Write down the three titles God gives Israel.

Ground. Ask what each title implies about Israel's relation to the other nations.

Depth. Consider why election is described as belonging to God rather than as privilege over others.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

God calls Israel to hear his voice and keep his covenant. He names the people his treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. The declaration that all the earth belongs to God shows that Israel's election exists within God's universal lordship. Their identity is a gift and a vocation, not permission for pride.

Open the Sealed Guess

4. Take out the sealed response you wrote in Session 1: 'Complete this sentence: God is bringing Israel out of Egypt so that Israel can...' Read your answer silently. If you are comfortable, share it. Then compare the room's answers with Exodus 19:4-6. What did we see early, what did we miss, and what has the text now made clearer?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The guesses should not be scored as right or wrong. Exodus has now supplied a fuller answer: God brings Israel out in order to bring the people to himself, establish covenant belonging, form them as his treasured possession, give them a priestly and holy vocation, and teach them to hear his voice. Freedom is not merely release from oppression. It is freedom for communion, worship, mission, and obedience.

5. What preparations and boundaries appear in Exodus 19:7-15 and 19:21-25? What do they teach without suggesting that God has changed his mind about bringing Israel to himself?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The people must consecrate themselves, wash their garments, prepare for the appointed day, and respect the boundary around the mountain. Moses repeatedly mediates God's instructions. These actions teach that God's holiness is real and that approach to him is received as a gift on his terms. The boundaries do not cancel relationship. They prepare a sinful people to encounter the holy God without treating him casually.

6. List the sights, sounds, movements, and reactions in Exodus 19:16-20. What impression does the passage create before any commandment is spoken?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The text presents thunder, lightning, a thick cloud, a loud trumpet, smoke, fire, a trembling mountain, an intensifying trumpet blast, and the people's trembling. Moses speaks and God answers. The scene communicates divine holiness, power, majesty, and initiative. The commandments come from the God who delivered Israel and whose presence cannot be reduced to an ordinary human opinion.

The Way Redeemed People Live

7. Before the first command, how does God identify himself in Exodus 20:2? How should that opening shape the way we hear everything that follows?

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. Read verse 2 aloud and name what God says he has already done.

Ground. Ask how that one sentence changes the way the ten that follow should be heard.

Depth. Discuss why grace before command is not the same thing as command without consequence.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

God identifies himself as the Lord, Israel's God, who brought the people out of Egypt and out of the house of bondage. Deliverance precedes command. The commandments are not a ladder by which Israel causes God to rescue them. They describe faithful life within a relationship God has already initiated.

Dig Deeper

Without trying to settle every case, sort the commandments into those that directly order worship of God and those that directly protect life with one's neighbor. What does their placement together suggest about covenant holiness?

Live discovery

In pairs, find and read the assigned New Testament passage. Circle or list every title that resembles Exodus 19:5-6. Then identify the person at the center and every action or purpose given to the people.

Let them find it. 1 Peter 2:4-10

8. Where does the New Testament reuse Sinai's identity language, around whom is the new people gathered, and what purpose is attached to their priestly identity?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

St. Peter describes those who come to Christ as living stones built into a spiritual house. He calls them a holy priesthood, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and God's own people. Their purpose includes offering spiritual sacrifices through Jesus Christ and proclaiming the saving deeds of the one who called them from darkness into light. The Sinai identity reaches the Church through union with Christ.

9. Build the strongest textual case you can for both of these statements: the whole covenant people has a priestly identity, and particular persons still exercise distinct roles of mediation or ministry.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Exodus 19:6 calls the entire nation a kingdom of priests. Yet Exodus 19 also distinguishes Moses, Aaron, priests, and the people, assigns different permissions, and repeatedly sends Moses between God and Israel. Exodus 20:19 shows the people asking Moses to hear and speak God's word to them. The text presents corporate priestly identity and differentiated mediation together.

10. Press the claim we just built. Does calling the whole people a royal priesthood make a distinct ministerial priesthood unbiblical?

Build then press

The strongest form of the objection. The New Testament calls all Christians a royal and holy priesthood. Every baptized believer has direct access to God through Christ and can offer spiritual sacrifices. Therefore, setting apart a class of ordained priests appears to reintroduce an obsolete barrier, diminish the equal dignity of believers, and contradict the priesthood shared by the whole Church.

Answering from the text. The equal baptismal dignity and real priestly vocation of all believers should be affirmed without qualification. Yet neither Exodus nor the New Testament requires common priesthood to mean identical functions. Exodus calls the entire nation priestly while simultaneously distinguishing Moses, Aaron, priests, and people. St. Peter's royal-priesthood language describes the whole Church's identity and mission, but it does not say that every member exercises every ministry. Catholic teaching therefore confesses one priesthood of Christ participated in in two distinct ways: the common priesthood of the baptized and the ministerial priesthood ordered to its service.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The strongest objection rightly protects the baptismal dignity and mission of every Christian. Its conclusion does not follow, however, because the biblical text already holds shared priestly identity and differentiated ministry together. The ministerial priesthood does not replace the priesthood of the baptized. It serves the Church so that the whole people may live its worship, holiness, witness, and mission in Christ.

Fear and Mediation

11. In Exodus 20:18-21, what do the people do, what do they ask Moses to do, and how can Moses say both 'Do not fear' and that the fear of God should remain before them?

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. Describe what the people do and what they ask.

Ground. Distinguish the fear Moses tells them to put down from the fear he tells them to keep.

Depth. Ask how reverence can draw a person nearer to God rather than drive them to a distance.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The people tremble, stand at a distance, and ask Moses to receive God's word and speak it to them. Moses reassures them that God's purpose is not their destruction, while also teaching that reverence for God should restrain them from sin. One kind of fear retreats from God in terror or distrust. Holy fear recognizes God's majesty, receives his word seriously, and refuses to treat covenant life casually.

Send

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

S1. Which part of Israel's covenant identity most challenges or encourages the way you currently understand your own baptismal identity?

S2. Where are you tempted either to treat God's commands as a way to earn his love or to treat his grace as if obedience no longer mattered?

Live It This Week

Practices

1. **Read before reacting:** On one day this week, slowly read Exodus 20:1-17. Begin with verse 2 and thank God for a specific act of grace before examining your obedience to any commandment.
2. **Practice a nightly covenant examen:** For three evenings, ask: Where did I receive God's gifts today? Where did I love God and neighbor faithfully? Where do I need mercy and a concrete change tomorrow?
3. **Exercise your baptismal priesthood:** Before work, class, caregiving, or service, deliberately offer that activity to God through Christ for one named person or need. At the end of the day, return it to God in thanksgiving.
4. **Choose reverence over avoidance:** If examination reveals serious or recurring sin, make a concrete plan to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation rather than remaining at a distance from God.

Scripture Memory

Exodus 19:4

"You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself."

Exodus 19:4

Closing Prayer

Pray together

Lord our God, you free your people and bring them to yourself. Write your law upon our hearts and teach us to live as your holy people. Through our Baptism, make our prayer, work, relationships, sacrifices, and witness an offering through Jesus Christ. Give us reverence that draws near in trust and obedience that answers grace with love. 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 19:1-20:21** Arrival at Sinai, covenant identity, preparation, theophany, Decalogue, fear, and mediation

Old Testament roots

- **Deuteronomy 7:6** Holy people and treasured possession
- **Jeremiah 31:31-34** New covenant and the law written within

Fulfillment

- **Matthew 5:17** Christ fulfills the Law and the Prophets
- **1 Peter 2:4-10** Sinai's priestly identity applied to the Church in Christ

Terms

- **Decalogue.** The ten words or Ten Commandments revealed within the covenant
- **common priesthood.** The real participation of all the baptized in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and kingly mission
- **ministerial priesthood.** The ordained participation in Christ's priesthood that serves the common priesthood through teaching, sanctifying, and pastoral governance
- **covenant.** A divinely initiated bond of belonging that establishes a people in relationship with God and orders their life with him

Catechism

- CCC 2056. The ten words belong to covenant revelation.
- CCC 2057. The Decalogue is understood within the liberating exodus.
- CCC 2060-2061. The gift of the commandments belongs within the covenant, and moral life is a response to the Lord's loving initiative.
- CCC 2062-2063. The commandments express what belonging to God in covenant implies, and God speaks them in the first person to the whole people and to each person.
- CCC 2066. Christian traditions number the commandments differently.
- CCC 1546. The baptized share in Christ's priestly office.
- CCC 1547. Common and ministerial priesthood differ while being ordered to one another.