

In Their Midst

Exodus: From Slavery to Covenant Presence

Session 14. The Glory Filled the Tabernacle

Reading: Exodus 40:1-38

Part One

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim

The group discovers that Exodus reaches its climax not merely in escape from Egypt but in God's glory dwelling among and guiding his people.

Catholic Touchstone

This session touches God's desire to dwell with his people, the fulfillment of the tabernacle in Christ and his Church, reverence for Christ's Eucharistic presence, and the hope of eternal communion with God.

Exodus ends where the whole journey has been heading. The people have been freed, formed by covenant, restored after idolatry, and organized for worship. Now the Lord takes possession of the completed tabernacle. Yet the ending holds fulfillment and expectation together. God's glory fills the dwelling, but even Moses cannot enter. The cloud guides Israel, but the journey is not finished. Help the group see both truths without rushing past either one.

What You Need to Know

The chapter moves from command to obedience to presence

Verses 1 to 16 give the Lord's directions for erecting and consecrating the tabernacle. Verses 17 to 33 narrate Moses carrying them out. Verses 34 to 38 describe the arrival of the cloud and glory. The repeated statement that Moses acted as the Lord commanded is not filler. It contrasts sharply with the self-directed worship of the golden calf and shows restored covenant obedience.

The calendar has turned

Exodus 40:17 places the erection of the tabernacle on the first day of the first month in the second year. Israel has passed from the night of departure into an ordered life centered on God's dwelling. The date gives the ending the feel of a new beginning rather than a final stopping point.

Cloud and glory belong together

The cloud that guided Israel from Egypt and covered Sinai now covers the tent of meeting. God's glory fills the tabernacle. The text does not identify God with a physical cloud. The cloud is a created sign that both reveals and conceals his holy presence. The Catechism recognizes cloud and light as recurring biblical signs associated with manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

Moses cannot enter

Do not soften Exodus 40:35. The mediator who entered the cloud on Sinai cannot enter the tent once the glory fills it. This does not mean that Moses has been rejected. It reveals the overwhelming holiness of the divine presence and leaves the story with an unresolved question of access. The tabernacle is a genuine gift, but it is not yet the final form of communion between God and humanity.

Presence does not mean confinement

Catholic teaching does not treat God as confined to a sanctuary. God transcends creation and is present to every creature. Scripture nevertheless describes particular ways in which he makes his presence known. Catholic churches are sacred places of prayer, sacramental worship, and Eucharistic reservation, but the building serves the mystery of Christ and his people. It does not contain God as though he were a local object.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

From Eden to the tabernacle

Human beings were made for life in God's presence, but sin brought exile and guarded access. Exodus marks a decisive restoration: God redeems a people and places his dwelling in their midst. The sanctuary does not erase the consequences of the fall, but it establishes a holy place where covenant communion, sacrifice, priesthood, and divine presence meet.

From Sinai to the completed dwelling

The cloud and glory that covered Mount Sinai in Exodus 24 now descend upon the tabernacle. The movement is significant. God's presence is no longer associated only with the mountain where the covenant was given. The dwelling will travel with the people, and the cloud will govern when they remain and when they set out.

The temple continues the pattern

When Solomon dedicates the temple, a cloud fills the house and the priests cannot continue their ministry because of the Lord's glory. The temple carries forward the tabernacle pattern, though Israel's later history also shows that a sacred building cannot substitute for covenant faithfulness.

The Word dwelt among us

John announces that the eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Greek verb *eskēnōsen* evokes pitching a tent or taking up a dwelling. Jesus identifies his own body as the temple. In him, divine presence is not merely near humanity through a sacred structure. The divine Son has truly assumed human nature.

The Church and the final dwelling

United to Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, the Church is described as God's temple and a dwelling place for God. This does not make the Church divine. It means that the Triune God graciously shares his life with his people. Revelation brings the theme to completion when God's dwelling is with humanity and the Lord God and the Lamb are the holy city's temple and light.

Voices of the Church

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

St. Irenaeus of Lyons, c. 130-c. 202

St. Irenaeus teaches that God's glory is manifested in the human person fully alive, while true human life consists in seeing God. God's self-revelation does not diminish human life. It brings humanity to the life for which it was created.
Against Heresies 4.20.7.

How this is cited. This is a summary of the well-attested teaching in the cited locus, not a direct quotation, because English translations vary.

For the group. God's presence is not an accessory to a full life. Communion with him is the goal of human life.

St. Augustine, 354-430

Summary of his teaching: preaching on the Word made flesh, St. Augustine says the Physician made an eye-salve of flesh for eyes that flesh had blinded, coming by flesh to put out the vices of the flesh and by death to slay death, so that we might be able to say that we have beheld his glory.

Tractates on the Gospel of John 2.

How this is cited. Summary of St. Augustine's exposition of John 1:14 in the second tractate, not a quotation, and no section number is given because the numbering varies between editions.

For the group. The tabernacle theme reaches a new depth in the Incarnation: God the Son comes among us in a true human nature.

St. Teresa of Avila, 1515-1582

St. Teresa compares the soul to a radiant castle with many rooms and urges Christians to recognize the dignity of a soul in which God desires to dwell. Growth in prayer is a journey toward deeper communion with the Lord who is already near.

The Interior Castle 1.1.1.

How this is cited. This is a summary of St. Teresa's own castle image and teaching in the cited locus. The image belongs to her, not to this study.

For the group. The God who dwells among his people also calls each baptized person to attentive, interior friendship with him.

Catechism Connection

The Catechism says

CCC 260. The ultimate end of the divine plan is the entry of God's creatures into the perfect unity of the Blessed Trinity.

CCC 300. God is infinitely greater than all his works, yet he is also present to his creatures and sustains them in being.

CCC 697. Cloud and light are recurring biblical signs of manifestations of the Holy Spirit, including Sinai, the tent of meeting, and the Transfiguration.

CCC 1094. Christian catechesis reads the events and symbols of the Old Covenant as prefigurations fulfilled in Christ.

CCC 1179, 1197. New Covenant worship is not confined to one earthly place, because Christ is the true temple and Christians are living stones built into it.

CCC 1181. A church building is a house of prayer and a sacred place where the Eucharist is celebrated and reserved.

CCC 1373. Christ is present to his Church in several ways and is present most especially under the Eucharistic species.

CCC 1044. In the renewed creation, God will dwell with humanity, wipe away every tear, and bring his saving plan to completion.

Thread Watch

Thread Watch

God dwelling among his people (resolve). Let Exodus 40 supply the book's climax. Then trace the fulfillment through the Incarnation, the Church, the Eucharist, and the final dwelling of God with humanity.

Why God brings Israel out (resolve). Send the group back to the purpose announced earlier in Exodus: God delivers Israel so that he may dwell among them as their God.

Mediators of deliverance (resolve). Notice that Moses faithfully completes his task but cannot enter the glory-filled tent. Honor his real mediation while allowing the limitation to point toward Christ's definitive mediation.

Where is the lamb? (resolve). Recall how sacrifice made approach to the sanctuary possible. Complete the canonical trajectory with the Lamb who is the light of the final holy city.

Fear of God versus fear of rulers (resolve). Pharaoh once controlled Israel's labor and movement. At the end of Exodus, the Lord's presence governs when Israel stays and when Israel journeys.

Deliverance through water (resolve). Recall that passage through the sea was not freedom without a destination. It began a journey toward covenant communion and God's dwelling presence, just as Baptism incorporates a person into Christ and his Church.

Objection Bench

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

If God is everywhere, language about his dwelling in a tent or church is primitive and misleading.

God is not spatially confined. Scripture distinguishes his universal presence from particular manifestations and covenantal modes of presence. The cloud is a created sign of God's presence. In Catholic worship, a sacred place serves God's self-gift, and Christ's Eucharistic presence is sacramental rather than a confinement of his divinity.

Moses being unable to enter proves that the tabernacle is a failure rather than the climax of Exodus.

The text presents the filling of the tabernacle as the successful completion of God's command, and the cloud remains to guide Israel. Yet Moses' inability to enter reveals that access is not complete. The ending can be both a real climax and an intentional opening toward a greater mediator and fuller communion.

Calling the Church God's temple encourages Catholics to treat a building as more important than people.

Catholic teaching first identifies Christ and his members as the living temple. Church buildings are sacred because they serve the assembly, the proclamation of the Word, sacramental worship, prayer, and Eucharistic reservation. Honoring sacred space and recognizing the dignity of baptized persons belong together.

Session Goals

1. Identify how command, obedient completion, and divine presence structure Exodus 40.
2. Discover from an earlier passage in Exodus that God's dwelling among Israel was a stated purpose of the deliverance.
3. Explain how the cloud both manifests God's presence and guides Israel's continuing journey.
4. Hold together the genuine climax of Exodus and the unresolved limitation represented by Moses' inability to enter.
5. Trace the tabernacle theme toward Christ, the Church, the Eucharist, and the final dwelling of God with humanity.
6. Choose a concrete practice of reverence, prayer, or obedient attentiveness to God's guidance.

Time Note

Planned for 75-90 Minutes

Allow 8 minutes for prayer and Win, 8 minutes for the reading, 47 to 55 minutes for Build, 10 minutes for Send and Live It This Week, and 4 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 3 first.
2. Shorten question 6 to one observation about the cloud's guidance.
3. Ask only the first half of question 10 and summarize the remaining fulfillment passages after discussion.

Part Two

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Pray together

Father, you heard the cry of your people, brought them out of slavery, formed them by your covenant, and placed your dwelling in their midst. Send your Holy Spirit to open the Scriptures to us. Teach us to recognize your presence, obey your word, and follow wherever you lead. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win

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

W1. What makes a place feel like home to you?

W2. When have you had to let someone else set the timing for a journey, project, or major decision?

Keep this warm and brief. The questions prepare the group to notice dwelling and guidance without giving away the chapter's discovery.

Read

Read aloud

Use three readers. Reader one reads Exodus 40:1-16, reader two reads verses 17-33, and reader three reads verses 34-38. Ask everyone else to mark repeated words, actions, and phrases.

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.

The dwelling is prepared

1. In verses 1 to 16, what actions does the Lord command, and what different persons, places, and objects are involved?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Moses is to erect the tabernacle, place and screen its furnishings, arrange the outer court, anoint and consecrate the sanctuary and its objects, wash and vest Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them for priestly service. The entire dwelling, not just one object, is ordered for holy worship.

2. As you scan verses 16 to 33, what repeated phrase or pattern stands out? What impression does it create?

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. Count how often the repeated phrase occurs.

Ground. Ask what the repetition is insisting on.

Depth. Consider why careful obedience is the fitting preparation for glory rather than a substitute for it.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Moses repeatedly acts as the Lord commanded him. The repetition emphasizes careful, concrete obedience. After the self-directed worship of the golden calf, Israel's sanctuary is completed according to God's word rather than human invention.

3. What do the placement of the ark, veil, table, lampstand, altars, basin, and court suggest about holiness and approach to God?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The sanctuary has ordered spaces, boundaries, furnishings, and ministries. God graciously places his dwelling among Israel, but approach is not casual or self-defined. Holiness orders access, worship, sacrifice, light, bread, incense, washing, and priestly service.

Dig Deeper

Compare the arrangement completed here with the instructions studied in Sessions 10 and 11. What has moved from promise and plan into visible reality?

The glory fills the tabernacle

4. What changes in verses 34 to 35? Who is acting now, and what are the results?

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. Name what changes and who is acting now.

Ground. Ask what Moses can accomplish here and what he cannot.

Depth. Discuss why the book ends with God doing the one thing no builder could do.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Moses has finished the work, but he does not cause the climax. The cloud covers the tent, and the Lord's glory fills the tabernacle. Moses cannot enter because the divine glory has taken possession of the dwelling. Human obedience prepares what God commanded, but God's presence remains his own gift.

Live discovery

Have pairs search Exodus 29:42-46. Ask them to underline every statement describing what God will do and every statement describing what Israel will know.

Let them find it. Exodus 29:42-46

5. Earlier in Exodus, God stated what he intended to do after consecrating the sanctuary and priesthood. Find that statement. According to it, how does Exodus 40 complete a purpose announced before the tabernacle was built?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

God promised to meet Israel, sanctify the tent and priests, dwell among the people, and be their God. Israel would know that he was the Lord who brought them out of Egypt so that he might dwell among them. Exodus 40 shows that announced purpose becoming reality.

6. According to verses 36 to 38, how does the cloud affect Israel's daily decisions? What does this add to the meaning of God's presence?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Israel sets out when the cloud is taken up and remains in place when it is not. The cloud is visible by day, and fire is visible by night. God's presence is not merely something to admire at the center of camp. It directs the people's movement and teaches them to receive the timing of both travel and waiting.

7. Look back over the whole movement of Exodus, from slavery under Pharaoh to the final image in verse 38. What has changed about who governs Israel's life and movement?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Pharaoh enslaved Israel, dictated its labor, and resisted its departure. By the end, Israel is a covenant people gathered around the Lord's dwelling and guided by his presence. Their freedom is not independence from every authority. It is freedom to belong to, worship, and follow the Lord.

Build, then press

8. Verse 35 says Moses cannot enter the tent. Why is that detail surprising after everything Moses has done, and what tension does it leave unresolved?

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. State plainly what verse 35 says.

Ground. Ask what it reveals about the limits of Moses' mediation.

Depth. Consider how an ending that withholds full access can still be good news.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Moses has served as prophet, intercessor, covenant mediator, and overseer of the sanctuary's construction. His inability to enter shows that even his faithful mediation does not provide unrestricted access to God's glory. God truly dwells among Israel, but complete communion has not yet arrived.

9. Press the tension. Can Exodus 40 really be called a triumphant climax if its mediator is left outside and Israel must continue wandering?

Build then press

The strongest form of the objection. A strong skeptical reading argues that the ending undercuts the claim of fulfillment. Israel has escaped Egypt, but it still has no settled home. The tabernacle has been completed, but the very person closest to God cannot enter it. The book therefore ends with distance, exclusion, and unfinished travel, not successful communion.

Answering from the text. The objection notices real features of the text, and they should not be denied. Yet the text also presents genuine fulfillment: the commanded work is complete, the promised glory fills the dwelling, and God's presence remains with the people in every stage of their journey. Exodus ends with both arrival and expectation. God has truly come to dwell among Israel, while the barrier before Moses points beyond this covenant arrangement toward fuller access.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Exodus reaches a real climax because God's promised dwelling has been established and his presence guides the people. It is not the final completion of the biblical story because access remains limited and the journey continues. The ending is triumphant without pretending that every promise has reached its ultimate fulfillment.

The dwelling theme moves forward

10. Read John 1:14, John 2:19-21, Ephesians 2:19-22, and Revelation 21:22-23. How does each passage carry the sanctuary theme forward without simply repeating the tabernacle?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The eternal Word assumes human nature and dwells among us. Jesus identifies his body as the temple. Those united to Christ are built together into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit. In the final holy city, the Lord God and the Lamb are its temple and light. The pattern moves from a sacred tent toward communion with God through Christ, incorporation into his people, and the final presence of God and the Lamb.

11. How should this chapter shape a Catholic understanding of sacred space, Eucharistic reverence, and the dignity of the baptized without confusing those realities with one another?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Sacred places matter because God uses visible, embodied signs and gathers his people for worship. Catholic churches deserve reverence, especially because the Eucharist is celebrated and reserved there. Christ's Eucharistic presence is unique and substantial, not merely symbolic. At the same time, baptized Christians are living members of Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit. Reverence for the Eucharist, sacred places, and human persons should reinforce rather than compete with one another.

Send

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

S1. Where might God be asking you to follow his timing rather than force movement or resist a season of waiting?

S2. What would change this week if you treated communion with God as the goal of freedom rather than one optional part of life?

Live It This Week

Practices

1. Make one visit to a Catholic church outside Sunday Mass. Spend ten quiet minutes before the tabernacle, acknowledging Christ's Eucharistic presence and asking for grace to follow his guidance.
2. Before one significant decision each day, pause and pray: 'Lord, lead me when it is time to move, and make me faithful when it is time to remain.'
3. Choose one concrete act of reverence at Mass this week, such as arriving early, genuflecting attentively, observing the Eucharistic fast, or remaining for a few minutes of thanksgiving after Communion.
4. Read Exodus 40 again at the end of the week. Write one sentence completing this prompt: 'God's deliverance is leading his people toward...'

Scripture Memory

Exodus 40:34

"Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle."

Exodus 40:34

Closing Prayer

Pray together

Lord God, you brought Israel out of slavery so that you might dwell among your people. We praise you for sending your Son, the true temple, and for making your Church a dwelling place in the Spirit. Deepen our reverence for Christ in the Eucharist. Make our lives holy by your grace, guide our steps, and bring us at last into the joy of your eternal presence. 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 40:1-38** Command, obedient completion, glory, and guidance

Earlier Exodus connections

- **Exodus 13:21-22** Cloud and fire guide Israel
- **Exodus 24:15-18** Cloud and glory cover Sinai
- **Exodus 25:8** The command to make a sanctuary
- **Exodus 29:42-46** God's stated purpose of meeting, sanctifying, and dwelling among Israel
- **Exodus 32:1-6** Self-directed worship at the golden calf
- **Exodus 39:42-43** Moses inspects and blesses the completed work

Temple continuation

- **1 Kings 8:10-11** The cloud and glory fill Solomon's temple

Fulfillment in Christ and the Church

- **John 1:14** The Word becomes flesh and dwells among us
- **John 2:19-21** Jesus speaks of the temple of his body
- **1 Corinthians 3:16-17** The Church is God's temple
- **Ephesians 2:19-22** God's people are built into a dwelling in the Spirit
- **Hebrews 9:6-12** Limited sanctuary access and Christ's greater priestly entry

Final dwelling

- **Revelation 21:1-3** God's dwelling is with humanity
- **Revelation 21:22-23** God and the Lamb are the city's temple and light

Terms

- **eskēnōsen.** John 1:14, 'dwelt,' with the sense of pitching a tent or taking up a dwelling

Catechism

- CCC 260. Communion with the Trinity is the goal of God's plan.
- CCC 300. God transcends creation and is present to it.
- CCC 697. Cloud and light are biblical signs of the Spirit's manifestation.
- CCC 1094. Old Covenant realities prefigure fulfillment in Christ.
- CCC 1179, 1197. New Covenant worship is not confined to one earthly place, because Christ is the true temple and Christians are living stones built into it.
- CCC 1181. Church buildings are sacred houses of prayer and Eucharistic reservation.
- CCC 1373. Christ is present to the Church, most especially in the Eucharist.
- CCC 1044. The renewed creation brings God's dwelling with humanity to completion.