

Session 7 – Questions

Exodus 19-23 • The Ten Commandments

EXODUS

Called to Freedom

A. Review the Context

The first half of the Exodus story takes place in Egypt, the place of bondage and captivity. Now, after three months of travel, the story moves to the mountain of God, Mt. Sinai. This will be the setting for the rest of Exodus' story.

God describes Israel's journey in touching imagery: "I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (Exodus 19:4). With the love of a maternal eagle, God has plucked Israel out of Egypt and brought it to the divine nesting place found on the mountain of God. It is here that God will nurture the fledgling nation and nourish it with a wisdom that will lay the foundation for its future life and mission.

But the shift in geography embodies more than a change of physical landscape; it signifies a turning point in the plot of Israel's story. In Egypt, Israel was enslaved politically and, moreover, spiritually. To leave Egypt is to escape tyranny and spiritual bondage. To come to Mt. Sinai and God's presence is to come to the freedom of sonship—the freedom, both spiritual and political—of being God's people. Yet authentic freedom means far more than being free "from"; it means being free "for." Israel has experienced the burden of slavery, but now God's people will encounter the responsibility that comes with freedom. The temptation will now be that slavery at times appears an easier road than the arduous path of liberation that comes through fidelity to God. Following Pharaoh, in many ways, will appear far easier than following the transcendent and holy God of the Hebrews.

Following God brings with it a set of rules—the Ten Commandments. These rules, however, come within the larger context of a relationship. God began His conversation with Moses at the burning bush not by giving His laws, but instead by revealing His personal name. He then redeemed Israel through His signs and wonders, bore them on eagles' wings, and sustained them in the wilderness with the bread from heaven and the water from the rock, until He brought them safely to His holy mountain. God has proven His love. Now, at Sinai, He in essence "proposes" to His people. Will they say "yes," and enter into a covenant of love with the God of all the world?

B. Read the Story

Now carefully read **Exodus 19-23**. Feel free to take a few notes as you read, if this helps you. Ask yourself the questions: *Who? What? When? Where? How? Why?*

As always, pray before you read.

C. Take a Deeper Look

Answering the following questions will draw you into the heart of the story. If you don't understand something, make a note to bring it up in the discussion.

A Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation (Exodus 19:1-25)

1. In Exodus 19, Israel arrives at Mt. Sinai after escaping Egypt and making a difficult three-month sojourn in the wilderness. Now at last, Israel is set to achieve the original goal of the Exodus at the Mountain of God. What is that goal? (Hint: See chapters 3 and 5.)

2. In Exodus 19:4, God says He bore His people up from Egypt on eagles' wings. Read some of the other places in Scripture where this image is used: **Deuteronomy 32:10-12; Psalm 17:8, 36:7, 57:1, 61:4, 63:7, 91:4**. What does this image say about God and His love for us?

3. a. In Exodus 19:5-6, God tells Moses that He wishes to make Israel into "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." If the whole nation of Israel is to be a "kingdom of priests," whom will they serve and how?

- b. According to the text, what is this promise to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" dependent on?

4. God does not impose the law and a covenant relationship upon Israel unilaterally. Entering into covenant with God is an invitation. The people respond by saying, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8). Why does God give us this freedom to choose or reject Him?

The Decalogue (Exodus 20:1-21)

5. a. **Living Tradition:** Read *Catechism No. 2057*. According to the Church, in what context are we to read the Ten Commandments?

- b. How does this context of God’s love change the way in which we approach the demands of the Ten Commandments and the moral life? (Hint: Read *Catechism* Nos. 2060-2062.)

The Law That Liberates

Often when we think of “law,” it has negative connotations; a list of things we cannot do, or rules which take away our freedom. The Church sees the law of God as quite the opposite. As Pope John Paul II has pointed out,

The Ten Commandments are not the arbitrary imposition of a tyrannical Lord ... They save man from the destructive force of egoism, hatred and falsehood. They point out the false gods that draw him into slavery: the love of self to the exclusion of God, the greed for power and pleasure that degrades our human dignity and that of our neighbor. The freedom that results is an eternal freedom: If we turn from ... false idols and follow the God who sets his people free and remains always with them, then we shall emerge like Moses, after forty days on the mountain, “shining with glory,” ablaze with the light of God!

(From the homily of John Paul II, “Celebration of the Word at Mount Sinai,” given at St. Catherine’s Monastery, February 26, 2000.)

6. Jewish tradition has seen the Ten Commandments as being split into two major groups—the first group relating to man’s relationship with God Himself, and the latter group referring to our relationship with our neighbor.

- a. Which commands belong to each of these two groups?

- b. How are these two groups related to one another?

7. The larger narrative of Exodus can help us better understand the Ten Commandments. How is your understanding of the first three commandments enriched by your understanding of the first half of the Exodus story?

Household Rules (Exodus 20:21-23:33)

8. Much of the practical instructions known as the Book of the Covenant (21:1-11) concern ordinances regarding the treatment of slaves, servants, and sojourners (i.e., immigrants). Why do you think this would be so important for Israel?

D. Application

This question will help you apply one of the key themes of the lesson to your life. After meditating on it respond to God with a brief written prayer if you choose.

- Many of the laws in the Book of the Covenant concern care for the poor and weak, and even for one's enemies (Exodus 23:4-5). Jesus reiterates these teachings in the New Testament and takes the call to love one's enemies even further, demanding that we "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5:39). Jesus not only teaches this, He gives us a living example when He feeds those who came to listen to His teaching or when He asks His Father to forgive those who are crucifying Him. How can we imitate Jesus in our daily life to help the poor and the weak, and to show love toward those who hate us?

Dear Lord...

Session 7 – Responses

Exodus 19-23 • The Ten Commandments

EXODUS

Called to Freedom

A. Review the Context

Discussion Leaders: Take some time to review the context and what was learned last week. Place yourself in the overall story by finding the reading in the diagram.

B. Read the Story

Discussion Leaders: Ask someone to summarize **Exodus 19-23**.

C. Take a Deeper Look

Discussion Leaders: Take your group through the questions, encouraging participation. It may be helpful to have someone read each passage before it is discussed.

A Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation (Exodus 19:1-25)

1. *In Exodus 19, Israel arrives at Mt. Sinai after escaping Egypt and making a difficult three-month sojourn in the wilderness. Now, at last, Israel is set to achieve the original goal of the Exodus at the mountain of God. What is that goal? (Hint: See chapters 3 and 5.)*

Back in Exodus 3, God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and called him to bring the Hebrew people back to this same place “to serve God upon this mountain” (vs. 12). Additionally, Moses’ original request to Pharaoh was that God’s people be allowed to go a few days journey into the wilderness to worship God (5:3). Now at last, Israel is set to worship (serve) the Lord on His holy mountain.

2. *In Exodus 19:4, God says He bore His people up from Egypt on eagles’ wings. Read some of the other places in Scripture where this image is used: Deuteronomy 32:10-12; Psalm 17:8, 36:7, 57:1, 61:4; 63:7, 91:4. What does this image say about God and His love for us?*

This image compares a mother’s love for her children with the love God has for His people. This profound love God shows in caring for us is especially illustrated in Deuteronomy 32:10—“He found him [Israel] in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, and he kept him as the apple of his eye”—and in Psalm 91:4—“He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.” The eagle imagery for God points to God’s loving and protective care. We need to realize that God wants to be with us and surround us in this way with His love.

3. a. *In Exodus 19:5-6, God tells Moses that He wishes to make Israel into “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” If the whole nation of Israel is to be a “kingdom of priests,” whom will they serve and how?*

The fact that the nation of Israel is God’s firstborn son implies that the other nations are God’s younger sons. As a priestly nation, they must serve the other nations as firstborn sons in the ancient world served as priests in their families. In other words, the Israelites are set apart from the nations because they have a priestly mission to minister to the nations. This mission is embodied in Israel’s identity as God’s firstborn son. As firstborn, Israel has a mission to model what living as God’s children is to be. God raises up Israel not in spite of other nations but in order to bless and serve these nations.

- b. *According to the text, what is this promise to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” dependent on?*

God says that Israel will become a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” if they “will obey [His] voice and keep [His] covenant” (vs. 5). Likewise, He says that if they do this, they will be God’s “own possession among the peoples.”

God’s blessing is contingent on our responding to His grace. God can do great things through us, but, more often than not, He chooses not to do them without us. God calls us to cooperate with His grace. In other words, Israel can serve as a kingdom of priests to the nations, on the condition that they obey God. Without obedience to God, Israel’s mission will fail.

4. *God does not impose the law and a covenant relationship upon Israel unilaterally. Entering into covenant with God is an invitation. The people respond by saying, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do” (Exodus 19:8). Why does God give us this freedom to choose or reject Him?*

God’s invitation is one of love, and love must be free; it can never be coerced. Unlike Pharaoh, who tried to force Israel to stay and serve, God will not accept Israel’s service if it is not freely given out of love.

The Decalogue (Exodus 20:1-21)

5. a. *Living Tradition: Read Catechism No. 2057. According to the Church, in what context are we to read the Ten Commandments?*

The *Catechism* points out that the Law, the Ten Commandments, is given in the context of God’s actions of love done to free His people from slavery. “The Decalogue must first be understood in the context of the Exodus, God’s great liberating event at the center of the Old Covenant” (No. 2057). Before He utters the first commandment, the Lord reminds His people “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:1). It is only after God reminds Israel what He has first done for them, that He calls them to follow His commands. Scripture is clear that the Law is only given in the context of covenant, in the context of a relationship of love with God.

- b. *How does this context of God’s love change the way in which we approach the demands of the Ten Commandments and the moral life? (Hint: Read Catechism Nos. 2060-2062.)*

The Law first reflects God’s love, then calls us to the responsibility of belonging to God. “The Commandments properly so-called come in the second place: they express the implications of belonging to God through the establishment of the covenant. Moral existence is a *response* to the Lord’s loving initiative. It is the acknowledgement and homage given to God and a worship of thanksgiving” (*Catechism* No. 2062).

Given that God only gives His rules within the context of the covenant relationship, living the moral life (as prescribed in the Ten Commandments and later in Jesus’ teaching) is not the arduous obedience to a taskmaster, but the loving response of a child who desires to follow the good direction of a beloved Father.

6. *Jewish tradition has seen the Ten Commandments as being split into two major groups—the first group relating to man’s relationship with God Himself, and the latter group referring to our relationship with our neighbor.*

- a. *Which commands belong to each of these two groups?*

The first three commandments refer to our relationship with God (20:3-11). The remaining seven refer to our relationship with our neighbor (20:12-17).

b. *How are these two groups related to one another?*

The second group is dependent upon the first. If we are not in a right relationship with God, we will not have a right relationship with our neighbor. This is exemplified by Israel's experience in Egypt—Pharaoh did not know the Lord, and as a result he enslaved the Hebrews.

7. *The larger narrative of Exodus can help us better understand the Ten Commandments. How is your understanding of the first three commandments enriched by your understanding of the first half of the Exodus story?*

In the first commandment, the Lord tells His people that they are to have no other gods before Him. This echoes back to His judgment of the gods of Egypt in the ten plagues. The Israelites themselves were struggling with becoming addicted to the many gods of Egypt. Now, the Lord is making clear that He is the one true God; He alone is to be worshiped.

In the second commandment, Israel is forbidden to take the name of the Lord God in vain. This commandment makes sense, especially in light of the earlier narrative, in which God revealed His personal name, *YHWH (Yahweh)*, to His people. Speaking God's name evokes His very presence. Thus, Israel should only call upon God's name with reverence and piety.

In the third commandment, Israel is instructed to keep the Sabbath holy. Israel can work on six days, but the seventh is to be set apart for the worship of God. This clearly recalls Pharaoh's order that God's people work with no time to rest or worship. The Lord has set His people free from slavery, now they are to be a living witness to the order of worship.

Household Rules (Exodus 20:21-23:33)

8. *Much of the practical instructions known as the "Book of the Covenant" (21:1-11) concern ordinances regarding the treatment of slaves, servants, and sojourners (immigrants). Why do you think this would be so important for Israel?*

Treatment of slaves was a key facet of the law because Israel itself had been enslaved to Pharaoh. Additionally, Moses, who had been a sojourner in the foreign land of Midian, understood well the importance of hospitality to the stranger. Once God's people inherited their own land, they were not to oppress those who sojourned among them. Instead, Israel was to be a kingdom of priests to lead all others to God.

D. Application

Discussion Leaders: If time allows, have group members share their response to the following application question:

- Many of the laws in the Book of the Covenant concern care for the poor and weak, and even for one's enemies (Exodus 23:4-5). Jesus reiterates these teachings in the New Testament and takes the call to love one's enemies even further, demanding that we "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5:39). Jesus not only teaches this, He gives us a living example when He, for example, feeds those who came to listen to His teaching, or when He asks His Father to forgive those who are crucifying Him. How can we imitate Jesus in our daily life to help the poor and the weak, and to show love toward those who hate us?

As a follow-up to this discussion, listen to or watch Tim Gray's talk on Session 7: Exodus 19 – 23, The Ten Commandments.

Sample