

THE INTERPRETATION BIBLE STUDIES LEADER HELPS

EXODUS

The IBS Leader Helps are designed to facilitate group study by providing lesson plans for the ten units in each of the Interpretation Bible Studies. These lesson plans utilize a variety of instructional methods that have been chosen for the express purpose of engaging participants in the learning process.

Each participant in the group should have a copy of IBS study book and should make a commitment to do advance preparation for each session.

The sessions are planned for one hour. If the time allotted is shorter than an hour, it will be necessary to be selective about the activities, choosing those that are most appropriate for your group.

Leader Preparation

Read Exodus in its entirety before beginning to teach. It is important to familiarize yourself with the book's overall content, so you can see how the individual passages fit into the larger scope of the book.

Skim through the whole study book to discern its flow. This is especially helpful if there are multiple teachers, in order to prevent leaping ahead into the next unit.

Prepare the room ahead of time. For informal discussion and ease of sharing, a semi-circular arrangement of chairs works best. Position yourself as one of the group, instead of setting yourself apart as the "authority."

Secure necessary teaching aids. A newsprint easel is an invaluable asset. Be sure to have markers and masking tape if you wish to display the sheets for future reference. Maps of the Holy Land in biblical times could be very helpful, especially one that shows the various possible routes of the exodus. Check the teaching suggestions for other materials necessary for certain units.

Prepare necessary handouts. Invite the participants to provide a folder for each handouts.

Keep the key idea in mind. Understand the purpose and goal of each activity.

Pray for God's guidance. Prior to making preparations for the session, allow time to pray for each participant and for yourself.

Unit 1: The Baby in the Basket (Exodus 2:1–10)

Key Idea: Exodus is a statement about the redemptive power of God. The escape from Egypt is not a war of independence won by the Israelites, but a deliverance accomplished by God.

Advance Preparation

For your own background information, look up *situation ethics* in a Bible dictionary or a theological word dictionary. Also look up *irony* in a dictionary or grammar book, and be prepared to give a definition of the word.

Prepare four sheets of newsprint as described below:

- Sheet 1: Make two columns. Label one “History” and the other “Gospel/Good News.”
- Sheet 2: Make two columns. Label one “Moses” and the other “Jesus.”
- Sheet 3: Make three columns. Label the first “Person,” the second “Power,” and the third “Significance.”
- Sheet 4: Make three columns. Label the first “Rule,” the second “Yes,” and the third “No.”
In the “Rule” column, write the following:
 1. One must never lie.
 2. One must always obey the lawful authority.
 3. Right and wrong are absolutes, not determined by the situation.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, use one of your own, or ask a participant to pray:

O Lord, prepare our hearts and minds so that we may hear your voice on this journey of study and spiritual exploration. Let a spirit of common search and discovery prevail among us. Give us grace to listen to views that may differ from our own. Let us grow in wisdom and knowledge. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

2. Introduction to the Study Book

If not done so before, hand out the study books. Spend a little time going over the format of the units. Suggest that a useful practice is to begin the reading of each unit with the Questions for Reflection. These offer a clue to the writer’s intention and help direct one’s reading. Give the class a few minutes to quickly read through the introduction and the first unit, keeping track of any initial questions or puzzlement.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. *Introduction to Exodus*

Briefly review the events in Exodus 2:1–10.

Post the first newsprint sheet. Have the class list the characteristics of *history* and *gospel*. Then discuss the idea of Exodus as *gospel* (pp. 1–4 in the study book). Ask: What is the “gospel” or “good news” of Exodus?

Post the second newsprint sheet. Invite the class to list and discuss similarities between Moses and Jesus. (See pp. 13–14 in the study book.)

Exploration (20 minutes)

4. *Relative Weakness and Power*

Post the third sheet of newsprint. Invite the class to list the cast of characters in Exodus 1:8—2:10. Write the names of each character in the first column as they are called out. Then have the participants assess the power and significance of each on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being least and 5 being most. (For example, Pharaoh would be 5 in power, the infant Moses would be 1.) Write the corresponding number in the appropriate column across from the person’s name.

Give a definition of the word *irony* (unexpected results), and then ask: Where is the irony in this situation?

Invite the participants to think of other examples where God works through people who have no obvious power. Ask:

- How does this idea of “divine irony” help answer the question of how God is present in this narrative?
- How does this divine irony generate hope even in situations where God appears absent?
- In what current situations might this insight apply?

5. *Not a War of Independence but a Deliverance*

Turn to the Questions for Reflection on p. 14 in the study book and deal with question 2. Note that at issue here is the way Israel understood what happened to it. Ask: What difference does it make to speak of what happened to the Israelites as a “deliverance” rather than a fight for freedom?

Response (10 minutes)*6. Is It Ever Right to Lie?*

Post the fourth sheet of newsprint, and take a quick poll by inviting the class to answer yes or no as you read out each of the three “rules” on the sheet. Keep a tally of each “yes” and “no” in the appropriate column, across from the rule under discussion.

Then expand the discussion by asking: Under what conditions, if any, might it be “right” to lie or disobey the lawful authority? When has that happened in your experience?

Note that *situation ethics* contends that what we ought to do depends on the situation. Discuss this proposition: Does the Bible teach that right and wrong are absolutes or that the right action may change depending on the situation?

Point out that the midwives lied to the lawful authority and disobeyed the Pharaoh’s expressed command—and God rewarded them. Ask: What does this suggest about how we ought to act? Do some principles (“do right” and “please to God”) supercede others (“always tell the truth”)?

Then add that the midwives did what they thought was right because they “feared God,” with no idea or plan where it would lead or end up. Ask: In what ways is this a strong argument against mere self-interest as a principle of action? Invite the participants to think of examples where individuals or churches have ignored this principle and acted only on the basis of what they thought was “safe” and would preserve their standing or power. Ask: How do you feel about this?

In light of the discussion, take a second poll and see if any opinions have changed.

Closing (5 minutes)*7. Closing Benediction*

Use these words or others of your choice:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

8. Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 2 and Exodus 3:1—4:17. Also ask them to think about any “burning bush” experiences in their own lives.

Unit 2: The Call of Moses (Exodus 3:1—4:17)

Key Idea: The dialog with Moses, whereby human objections are stated and dealt with, reveals much about God and about God’s way of interacting with us.

Advance Preparation

Bring paper, crayons, markers, and clay for use in step 6.

For your own background information, look up *theophany* in a Bible dictionary or a theological word dictionary.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, use one of your own, or ask a participant to pray:

O Lord: Moses said, “I must turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.”
Lord, make us alert to your burning bushes in our own lives. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Review of the Scripture Passage

Briefly review the events of Exodus 3:1—4:17.

4. Questions for Reflection

Turn to the Questions for Reflection on pp. 24–25 in the study book and discuss those four questions.

Exploration (20 minutes)

5. Curiosity and Call

Have the class turn to Exodus 3:1–6. Invite the class to identify the exact order of events. Note that it is only when God sees that Moses’ curiosity leads him to turn aside that God speaks to him.

Point out that this passage illustrates how *curiosity* leads to *call*. Presumably, had Moses not been curious and turned aside, God would not have issued the call. Discuss this dynamic of faith by asking the participants:

- What does it say about God’s nature and way of interacting with humans?
- What other examples of this same dynamic (curiosity leading to call) can you think of, in your own life or the lives of others?

6. *The Giving of a Name*

Note that Exodus 3:14, in which God reveals the divine name, is one of the most puzzled over verses in the entire Hebrew Bible. This is largely because God’s name is not quite translatable and cannot be easily defined—just like the God that the name represents!

Invite the participants to reflect, however, not on the *meaning* of the name but on its *giving*. Have them consider how humans name things like pets, boats, summer houses, and so on. Ask:

- How does giving a name to something change our relationship to it? For example, what happens when the sparrow your seven-year-old found in the back yard moves from being called “that bird” to being called “Nippy”?
- In Genesis, the man names everything else. Here in Exodus, humans do not name God; God does. What does it mean for Israel that the Almighty already has a name?
- What does it mean to Israel that God reveals the divine name to them?

Response (10 minutes)

7. *“Here am I, Lord; Send Someone Else!”*

Point out that the call of God is not just for mind and spirit: Moses’ response could not be just to believe or speak; he had to act. Yet his initial response in Exodus 4:13 is the all too typical human response to God’s call: “O my Lord, please send someone else.”

Invite the class to use the materials you have provided to draw a picture or sculpt a figure illustrating some “burning bush” experience in their own life. Ask them to gather in groups of three and share their stories as they feel comfortable. Part of the story should include whether their response to God’s call was in any way like Moses’—hesitant, uncomfortable, and unsure. Then bring everyone back together and invite each triad to share whatever general insights they would like.

Closing (5 minutes)*8. Closing Charge*

Use these words or others of your choice:

Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous and strong. Let all that you do be done in love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

9. Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 3 and Exodus 7:1–24. Also ask them to consider the statement by William M. Ramsay in the sidebar on p. 28 of the study book regarding the purpose of the plagues.

Unit 3: The First Plague (Exodus 7:1–24)

Key Idea: The struggle in this passage is not between Pharaoh and Moses, but between the Egyptian gods and Yahweh.

Advance Preparation

Bring paper, markers, crayons, and clay for use in step 6.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, use one of your own, or ask a participant to pray:

O Lord, the Exodus plague story is full of puzzling and difficult details, but it contains wonder and power as well. Be with us as we wrestle with this text. Open us to receive your Word. In Jesus' name, Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Review of the Scripture Passage

Briefly review the events of Exodus 7:1–24.

4. Questions for Reflection

Turn to the Questions for Reflection on p. 36 in the study book and discuss those four questions.

Exploration (20 minutes)

5. Hardening Pharaoh's Heart

Point out that, on p. 27, the study book calls Exodus 7:3 one of the most troubling verses in all of Exodus and then goes on to say:

This verse creates a major theological question: Why would God motivate someone to sin, then turn around and punish that person for committing the sin? At best, God's behavior seems illogical. At worst, such behavior appears sadistic. On a more practical level, assuming that God wants the Israelites to be free, why would God cause Pharaoh to be an obstruction?

Have the participants review pp. 28–29 of the study book, noting especially the ways that some interpreters of this text have tried to deal with the problem. Then ask: What do you think is going on here?

After the participants have had time for discussion, point out that in John Calvin’s commentary on this passage, he argues that one must not interpret God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in a way that makes God the author of sin. Pharaoh’s resistance to God’s will is his own. What God withholds is the grace to rise beyond his sin, thus leaving Pharaoh to suffer the just consequence of his resistance. Invite the participants to evaluate this idea.

6. *Who Were the Plagues for?*

Ask the participants:

- Who were the plagues for? Who was the “audience”?
- What was the purpose in each case?

List their suggestions on newsprint.

The list of suggested “audiences” should at least include Pharaoh, Moses, the Egyptians, and the Israelites. Point out that all of these are viable answers. Pharaoh and the Egyptians must realize their struggle is against Almighty God; Moses and the Israelites must realize that their deliverance is by the hand of Yahweh.

Response (10 minutes)

7. *“Let My People Go”*

Exodus 7:16 contains four of the most poignant and moving words in the Bible: “Let my people go.” Invite the class to use the materials you have provided to draw a picture or sculpt a figure representing some situation where these words are particularly meaningful. It could be personal, historical, or contemporary. Have people share their work in groups of three.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. *Closing Charge*

Use these words or others of your choice:

Go forth in the name of the Lord. This is God’s charge: to give our allegiance to Jesus Christ and to love one another as he commanded. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

9. Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 4 and Exodus 12:1–51. Also have them think about similarities between the Passover event and the sacrifice of Christ.

Unit 4: Free at Last (Exodus 12:1–51)

Key Idea: The first Passover constituted the Israelites as the people of God. Subsequent celebrations of Passover do not just remember what happened long ago, but effectively *reconstitute* contemporary participants as the people of God.

Advance Preparation

Bring a box of matzos (unleavened bread).

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, use one of your own, or ask a participant to pray:

O Lord, help us now to concentrate on your Word. Screen out every voice that is not your own. Establish in us the courage of our convictions and the assurance of things not seen. In Jesus' name, Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Review of the Scripture Passage

Briefly review the events of Exodus 12:1–51.

4. Questions for Reflection

Turn to the Questions for Reflection on p. 48 of the study book. Divide the class into three subgroups. Assign question 1 to the first subgroup, question 3 to the second subgroup, and question 4 to the third subgroup. After some time for the subgroups to work on these questions, invite them to share their results in the total group.

Exploration (20 minutes)

5. The Killing of the Firstborn

Invite the class to share their opinions, reactions, and feelings about the killing of the Egyptian firstborn. At the start, simply list their responses on a sheet of newsprint without debating them. When the list appears complete, let people react by challenging, debating, or defending the

viewpoints on the list. Make sure these questions are addressed by the group in some form or other during the discussion: Was this act justified? Was this act any less monstrous than Pharaoh's order to kill all Israelite male babies? What is the justification?

Then stage a formal debate over this statement:

Resolved: The killing of the Egyptian firstborn teaches the lesson that terrorism works, because Pharaoh's reaction was to let the Israelites go.

Form teams, leaving some people left over to act as judges. Allow a few minutes for the two teams to think up their arguments, then have the debate. Don't let it go on too long. Let each side make their initial statement, then let each side make counter-statements to what the other team said. Allow each team a final 30-second summary of their main points. Let the judges decide which side made the better case. Then have the whole group process the experience.

If there is time remaining, raise the question of whether the ends justify the means. Point out that Yahweh's intention (the "end") was freeing the people; the means was killing the Egyptian firstborn. Then ask:

- Does the end justify the means, if the end is considered just?
- Who decides the justice of the end result?
- Does the goal of liberating a country or a people justify suicide bombers, as in the current Middle East? Why or why not?

6. Just Reparations?

Point out that in Exodus 3:20–22 God promised that the people would not go out of Egypt "empty-handed." Rather, they would "plunder the Egyptians"—which is exactly what happened, according to Exodus 12:35–36.

Have the participants discuss the rightness or wrongness of this act. Ask:

- To what extent was this plundering justified or not?
- Does this biblical text support the contemporary claim by African-Americans that they are due reparations for wages lost during their time as slaves, when they, like the Israelites, were subjected to forced labor? Why or why not?
- Does it likewise support Native American claims for reparations or return of land due to broken treaties by the United States government? Why or why not?

Response (10 minutes)*7. Passover and Christ*

Have the participants discuss the following questions, based on pp. 45–48 of the study book:

- What are the similarities between the Passover and the sacrifice of Christ?
- Why does the church speak of Jesus as the paschal (Passover) lamb?
- The Jewish Passover meal, the Seder, enacts the grace of God in creating the Jewish people as the people of God. How does the Lord's Supper do the same for the New Israel, the Church?

Closing (5 minutes)*8. Closing prayer*

Pass out portions of matzos to everyone. Read Exodus 12:34 aloud: “So the people took their dough before it was leavened, with their kneading bowels wrapped up in their cloaks on their shoulders.”

Then say: “May this unleavened bread be a reminder to us that we must be about God's work of rescue and release in the world.”

Let the people eat, and then close with this prayer:

God has shown us what is good. And what does the Lord require of us but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God? In Jesus' name, Amen.

9. Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 5 and Exodus 14:1–31.

Unit 5: The Miracle at the Red Sea (Exodus 14:1–31)

Key Idea: Judaism is based on the miracle of the deliverance at the Red Sea, just as Christianity is based on the miracle of the empty tomb.

Advance Preparation

In addition to the Scripture passage highlighted in this session, also read Exodus 13:17–22 and 15:1–18.

Bring paper, crayons, markers, and clay for use in step 8.

For your own background information, look up *miracle*, *Red Sea*, and *liberation* in a Bible dictionary or a theological word dictionary.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray Exodus 15:1b–13 as a litany prayer, alternating verses between leader and people. Begin with “Let us pray. I will sing to the Lord . . .,” and end with “In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Review of the Scripture Passage

Briefly review the events of Exodus 14:1–31.

4. Questions for Reflection

Have the participants turn to the Questions for Reflection on p. 60 in the study book and answer questions 1 and 3.

Note that, for Christians, the miracle of the crossing of the Red Sea resonates theologically with the resurrection of Christ. Ask: Why is that so? What are the similarities and differences? In what way were the results the same?

Then ask: How can Christians understand the resurrection of Christ as completing God’s liberation of the chosen people without feeling triumphalistic or superior to Jews, Muslims, or other religious adherents?

5. *Educated to See God's Guidance*

Read Exodus 13:21–22 aloud:

The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

Invite the class to think of other biblical examples of how God made the divine presence known to the people. List these on a sheet of newsprint. Consider the importance of education in this regard—that is, unless the people were instructed into the real meaning of the pillars, the cloud and fire were simply strange phenomena. Now ask the participants to describe some “pillars of cloud and fire” from their own experience and to identify some folk responsible for helping them see God’s guidance for what it was.

Exploration (20 minutes)

6. *The Glory of God*

Point out that, in Exodus 14:1–4, God tells Moses to place the Israelites in a vulnerable position that makes no military sense. The reason given is that so God will gain glory. Ask: What is the purpose of this strategy? Why not instruct the Israelites how to win a military battle? Why does God need the glory?

Then consider other places in the Bible where this motif of human weakness is emphasized so that honor can go to God. Examples might include the age and barrenness of Sarah, Jacob’s questionable character, or the manger babe who is Emmanuel.

7. *Moses' Quiet Faith*

Have the participants answer question 2 on p. 60 in the study book.

8. *The Nature of the Miracle*

Exodus 14:21–29 says that Moses stretched out his hand, the wind blew, the waters parted, and the Israelites walked over on dry land. Moses repeated the gesture when the Egyptians started across and the waters rushed back, consuming them. Ask:

- What is the nature of the miracle here?
- Why is it fruitless to try to rationalize it?
- Why is it more helpful to view this story as a claim for one’s faith rather than a geophysical puzzle to be solved?

9. The Exodus and Christ

Have the participants look at 1 Corinthians 10:1–13 to see how the early church both revered and went beyond the Exodus event in their understanding of the meaning of Christ. In regard to the this passage from 1 Corinthians, ask:

- What does it mean to say that “all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and the sea?”
- What are the cosmological similarities between the Exodus and the resurrection of Christ?
- Why did the early church come to think of Christ as the new Moses, just as they came to think of him as the second Adam?

Response (10 minutes)

10. Exodus as a Symbol of Liberation

Read aloud this sentence from p. 59 of the study book:

Exodus 14 is a statement to the church and to individual Christians about the freedom that God has won for us from those forces over which we have little or no control: sin, disease, loneliness, pain, and death.

Invite the class to use the materials you have provided to illustrate this in their own lives through a picture, words, a song, or sculpture. Invite them to share their work in groups of three, to the degree that they are comfortable doing so.

Closing (5 minutes)

11. Closing Prayer

Use these words or others of your choice:

The God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, make you complete in every good so that you may do God’s will, working always that which is pleasing in God’s sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever! In Jesus’ name, Amen.

12. Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 6 and Exodus 19:1–25. Also ask them to consider the following:

When Moses came out of the mist of the mountain, held up the tablets, and said “These are God’s laws,” the people had to take his word for it, since only Moses was on the mountain. In what ways have things not changed today with regard to God’s word and laws and taking someone else’s word for what it is?

Unit 6: Thunder and Lightning, Fire and Smoke: God Appears at Sinai
(Exodus 19:1–25)

Key Idea: Out of mercy, God chose Israel to be the vehicle by which God blessed the whole world. With God’s covenant comes both privilege and responsibility, grace and accountability.

Advance Preparation

As background scripture, read Deuteronomy 7:6–8, 1 Peter 2:9–10, and Hebrews 12:18–24.

For your own background information, look up the following words in a Bible dictionary or theological dictionary:

- revelation
- covenant
- theophany
- holy
- priestly

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, use one of your own, or ask a participant to pray:

O Lord, you have been present to your people myriad ways: a pillar of cloud, a pillar of fire, a great wind that divided the waters, a rescue from captivity, the giving of your holy law, in our Lord, Christ Jesus, and through the power of the Holy Spirit. Give us eyes to discern your presence, ears to hear your voice, hearts to receive your mercy. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Review of the Scripture Passage

Briefly review the events of Exodus 19:1–25.

4. Questions for Reflection

Have participants answer the Questions for Reflection on p. 72 of the study book.

Exploration (20 minutes)

5. *A Covenant with Conditions*

Tell the following to the class:

Exodus 19:5 says, “Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.” There are at least two ways to look at this. It might mean that if the people follow God’s laws, then, as a reward, God will make them God’s people. Or it might mean that by keeping the covenant and obeying God, they show what a treasured possession is. A people who keep the covenant are a treasured possession.

Then ask the following questions:

- Which of these makes the most sense to you?
- What are other interpretations of this verse?
- In what way is this covenant different from the covenants with Abraham and Noah? (Those covenants had no conditions.)

6. *A Priestly Kingdom, a Holy Nation*

Have someone read aloud Exodus 19:5b–6. Then ask:

- What does it mean to be a priest?
- How can a nation be “priestly”?
- What does it mean to be holy?
- How is God’s holiness different from our own?
- How can a nation be “holy”?

7. *A Chosen Nation*

Have someone read aloud Deuteronomy 7:6–8. Then ask:

- Why did God choose the Israelites?
- Many people consider themselves chosen and especially favored by their gods due to their personal beauty, military might, intrinsic value, or other virtues. What did Israel think?
- What were the Israelites chosen *for*?
- Being chosen brings responsibility and accountability. How might this lead a people to want to give up the title of “chosen”?

Response (10 minutes)*8. The Church as the New Israel*

Have someone read aloud 1 Peter 2:9–10. Then ask as many of the following questions as you can in the allotted time:

- What does it mean for the church that the New Testament writer uses the same language formerly applied to Israel?
- How can the church be holy and be God’s own people? To what degree is that a matter of belief, behavior, ritual, ethics, sacrifice?
- What would it mean if our church took these words seriously? What, if anything, would change? What actions would you recommend?
- What would it mean if you took these words seriously as an individual?
- How do we as Christians, or our church as an institution, “proclaim the mighty acts” of God?
- What does applying this language of “chosen people” to the church mean for our understanding of Israel, the original chosen people? Are Jews still the chosen people? Did the church supplant Israel, so that now Israel is “unchosen”? What would that say about the promises of God, God’s character, and the fidelity of God’s word once given?
- Paul says in Romans 11:1, “I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!” Paul goes on to speak of branches being grafted onto the root. Why does our understanding of God’s promises lead us to accept this idea of our being grafted onto the chosen people rather than of our replacing Israel as the chosen people?

Closing (5 minutes)*9. Closing Charge*

Use these words or others of your choice:

As God’s own, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, and patience, forgiving each other as the Lord has forgiven you, and crown all these things with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

10. Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 7 and Exodus 20:1–7. Also ask them to consider the question: In what sense are the commandments an act of grace rather than mere legal prescription?

Unit 7: The Ten Commandments, Part One (Exodus 20:1–7)

Key Idea: The ten commandments are not merely sound, general rules that anybody might agree with. They are a covenant document, part of the agreement by which Yahweh and Israel are linked through faith and faithfulness.

Advance Preparation

For your own background information, look up the following words in a Bible dictionary or theological dictionary:

- law
- covenant
- monotheism
- idolatry

Bring paper and pens or pencils for the group.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray Psalm 81 as a litany prayer. Begin with “Let us pray,” then have the leader and the people read alternate verses. End with “In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Review of the Scripture Passage

Have someone read aloud Exodus 20:1–7.

4. Preliminary Questions and Answers

Invite the class to jot down answers to the following questions:

- What do the ten commandments mean to you?
- What is your first memory of the commandments?

Have the group share their answers in groups of three and report the highlights to the class as a whole.

Note that there is currently a controversy over displaying the ten commandments in public places such as public schools, courts, and government buildings. Ask:

- Why do you think it is either right or wrong to allow such displays?
- What difference does it make to say that this is a covenant document, part of the agreement by which Yahweh and the community of faith are linked?

Exploration (20 minutes)

5. The First Commandment

Sometimes we fool ourselves today by thinking that since there is no longer actual worship (for the most part) of strange deities, this commandment does not much apply to us. Invite the class to list the modern “gods” that tempt us. Ask:

- In what ways do we “worship” these gods, that is, give our time and sacrifice to them while giving only lip service to the God made known in Jesus Christ?
- How can you judge where someone’s ultimate loyalty and commitment is?

6. The Second Commandment

The Israelites were not to make any image of God (or, perhaps, of anything else). Ask:

- Why is making an image of God such a temptation for humans?
- What are some ways that we make “images” of God today?
- In what ways do these “images” help us see God? In what ways do they limit what we see?

7. The Third Commandment

For many of us who grew up with the King James Version of the Bible, not taking “the Lord’s name in vain” meant don’t cuss. The language of the New Revised Standard Version poses other interpretations when it translates this verse in terms of not making wrongful use of God’s name. Have the participants consider the following:

- What is a “wrongful use” of the name of the Lord?
- How do we “misuse” the Lord’s name in our lives?

Note that the study book connects this commandment to oath-taking in trials and telling the truth. Ask: In this sense, what are some ways we as a nation, as a church, and as individuals break this commandment?

Response (10 minutes)*8. The Commandments for Today*

Invite the participants to write a paraphrase of the first three commandments that directly reflects life today. Have them share their work in groups of three.

Closing (5 minutes)*9. Closing Charge*

Use these words or others of your choice:

Go out into the world in peace. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. In Jesus' name, Amen.

10. Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 8 and Exodus 20:8–17. Also ask them to consider the question: What was Jesus' attitude toward the ten commandments?

Unit 8: The Ten Commandments, Part Two (Exodus 20:6–17)

Key Idea: The fifth commandment (“honor your parents”) is central, because what parents are to teach their children is to love God with all their heart, mind, and souls (Deut. 6:3–7).

Advance Preparation

For biblical background, read Deuteronomy 6:1–9, Psalm 1, and Matthew 5:17–22, 27–28.

For your own background information, look up the following words in a Bible dictionary or theological dictionary:

- honor
- murder
- steal
- perjury
- covet

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray Psalm 1 as a litany prayer. Begin with “Let us pray,” then have the leader and the people read alternate verses. End with “In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Review of the Scripture Passage

Have someone read aloud Exodus 20:8–17.

4. Questions for Reflection

Turn to the Questions for Reflection on pp. 96–97 in the study book, and discuss each of them. Let people pursue any particular interests and questions. There is a lot to think about in this unit. Use these questions to generally cover the material.

Use the material in the next section as time, and your class’s interest, allows.

Exploration (20 minutes)

5. *The Fourth Commandment*

Note that the commandment calls for two things: to “remember” the Sabbath day and to “keep it holy.” Ask: How shall we do this?

Point out that this law is specific about who shall rest: sons and daughters, male and female slaves, livestock, and even the non-Jewish foreigners residing in Jewish towns. Then ask:

- To what degree was this, perhaps, the first “fair labor practices” law?
- What effect might it have had when the Israelites came into a country and then gave their slaves one day off in seven?
- Whom does the list in the commandment exclude from this rest? (If one assumes the laws were initially directed at adult males who owned property, the answer is: The wife.)

Then consider Jesus’ words in Mark 2:22–23: “The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath, so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.” Ask: How does this help us interpret and apply the fourth commandment today?

6. *The Fifth Commandment*

Present the following background to the participants:

Some scholars argue that the fifth commandment is central to the Decalogue and the future of Israel, especially if it is linked with Deuteronomy 6:1–9. In the commandment, God says to children, in essence: “Honor (literally, accept as weighty) the teachings of your parents.” In Deuteronomy 6:7, God tells the parents, in essence, “Teach your children to follow my commandments, so that your days may be long.” Jesus said that every letter in the law will be accomplished (Matthew 2:17)—but the only way that can happen is if parents teach their children rightly, and if children honor what their parents tell them.

Then invite the participants to evaluate this understanding of importance of the fifth commandment. Ask:

- How might the connection of these two texts have mattered to Israelites in general? to the Israelites in exile in Babylon? to those who returned from exile?
- In what way is this still true of the relationship between the generations today?

7. *The Sixth Commandment*

Note that in Hebrew this commandment reads, “You shall not murder.” The Hebrew language had another term for cases of capital punishment (“shall be put to death”), which is proscribed for certain offenses (see Ex. 21:16; Deut. 21:18–21).

Ask:

- How do we understand and define murder in our day?
- What are some non-physical ways that one person can “murder” another (for example, killing self-esteem)? Are such actions counter to the commandment?
- This commandment has been used by pacifists to argue against war. Is there such a thing as a “just war”? Why or why not?

8. *The Seventh Commandment*

Look at what Jesus says about adultery in Matt. 5:27–30. Ask: Why did Jesus put this in terms that seem to make almost everyone an adulterer?

Then note that, although Jesus’ words seems to equate thinking about something with doing it, there still is a considerable difference between the *thought* and the *act*. Discuss the value and utility of maintaining this distinction.

9. *The Eighth Commandment*

Ask the participants:

- Under what conditions, if any, is stealing defensible?
- Looking at what happens to white collar criminals, one might conclude that if you’re going to steal money, make sure it’s a large amount. Why is it that white collar criminals who abscond with huge amounts receive relatively light punishment?
- What are some intangible things we can steal from another? (Possible answers might be pride, hope, innocence, and, in connection with the next commandment, someone’s good name.)

10. *The Ninth Commandment*

Ask the participants:

- What happens to a society when truth-telling breaks down?
- To what degree is truth-telling a value in your own work place or company? in our society at large? in the government? in the church?
- Consider examples where the government has withheld the truth from the public. Is this ever justified? What does it do to our national life?

11. The Tenth Commandment

In a recent movie, the CEO of a company declared “Greed is good!,” meaning, one supposes, good for his business. Ask the participants to evaluate this perspective.

Then point out that some advertising works on the principle of creating dissatisfaction—dissatisfaction with what you have, the way you look, what you wear, where you live, what you drive, who you are, and so on. Ask:

- Is this necessary to keep the economy going?
- If so, what does that say about us as a society?
- How can the church resist these negative messages and the urge to always seek something better?

Finally, note that some commentators think this commandment is a summary of the sixth through ninth commandments. In other words, they say that if we did not covet, the other prescriptions would be unnecessary. Test this idea by looking at Commandments 6–9 in light of Commandment 10.

Response (10 minutes)

12. Love Fulfills the Law

Have two volunteers read aloud Mark 12:28–31 and Rom. 13:8–10. Then apply what Jesus and Paul say to the commandments to see if this works. Ask: Is it really the case that if we love God completely and our neighbors as ourselves, then we will find ourselves keeping the commandments in both attitude and deed?

Closing (5 minutes)

13. Closing Prayer

Use these words or others of your choice:

Let us pray. Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through him, in whose name we pray. Amen.

14. Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 9 and Exodus 32:1–35. Also ask them to consider the question: What are the “Golden Calves” that we make in our society?

Unit 9: The Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1–35)

Key Idea: The quick departure of Israel from their covenant promise to obey God’s commands was an ominous sign of what was to come. The pattern of disobedience and judgment was set.

Advance Preparation

As biblical background, read Exodus 24:1–18 and Hebrews 13:8. Bring paper, crayons, markers, and pens or pencils for the group.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, use one of your own, or ask a participant to pray:

O God, before we criticize too harshly the Israelites for their desire for and worship of the golden calf, make us aware of the golden calves in our own lives. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Review of the Scripture Passage

Briefly review the events of Exodus 32:1–35.

4. Questions for Reflection

Turn to the Questions for Reflection on pp. 109–110 in the study book. Divide the class into four subgroups, and assign each group one of the questions to work on. Bring them back together after 8–10 minutes, and have each subgroup report on their discussion.

Exploration (20 minutes)

5. The Seriousness of the Covenant Promises

Point out that Exodus 24:1–18 describes an imposing ceremony in which the people accept the covenant extended to them, and that pp. 98–99 of the study book mention four significant features of this ceremony.

Then ask:

- What does this say about how seriously God takes the demands of the covenant and the promise by the people to obey God's commands?
- Do we have any similar ceremonies in the church? If not, should we and what might they look like? What would be the utility and function of such ceremonies?

6. *"Could You Not Watch with Me One Hour?"*

Remind the participants that Jesus took the disciples to the garden of Gethsemane to watch with him, and they fell asleep. Peter betrayed him three times before daybreak. Then compare these stories with the Israelites' experience with the golden calf.

Note that God said to Moses, "Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them" (Exodus 32:7–8). Then ask the following questions:

- What does this portend for the future?
- How does God respond to such unfaithfulness?
- What parallels can you suggest from similar experiences in your own life, where those you loved and trusted let you down? How did you respond?

7. *Does God Change the Divine Mind?*

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* says in answer to Question 4 (What is God?) that, "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." Hebrews 13:8 says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

Note that, based on these sources, people sometimes argue that God's mind can't change. Exodus 32:14 says differently, however. Invite the participants to consider the ramifications of this clearly biblical idea about God. Ask: What are the sorts of factors that might lead God to change the divine mind? (Remember the story of Abraham bargaining with God regarding the city of Sodom, in Genesis 18:16–33).

Response (10 minutes)

8. *What Is Your Golden Calf?*

Ask: Who are the main characters in this story about the golden calf? Write the suggestions on a sheet of newsprint. (These should at least include Moses, Aaron, Yahweh, and the people.) Then ask: With whom do you identify in this story and why?

Make available the paper, crayons, and markers. Ask the participants to illustrate on one side of the paper the golden calves of our society. On the other side, ask them to illustrate their own, personal golden calves. Bring everyone back together and ask: What are some of the golden calves of the church?

Closing (5 minutes)

9. Closing Prayer

Use these words or others of your choice:

Let us pray. May the God of peace make you holy in every way and keep your whole being—spirit, soul, and body—free from every fault at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

10. Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 10 and Exodus 34:1–35. Also ask them to come prepared to deal with this perspective: “Why bother? God will forgive; it’s his way.” (French proverb)

Unit 10: The Covenant Restored (Exodus 34:1–35)

Key Idea: Covenant renewal celebrates the triumph of mercy over judgment, thus setting the pattern brought to completion in Jesus Christ.

Advance Preparation

For your own background information, look up the following words in a Bible dictionary or theological dictionary:

- vows
- fidelity
- faithfulness
- unfaithfulness

Bring paper, crayons, markers, and pens or pencils for the group.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, use one of your own, or ask a participant to pray:

O Lord, we thank you for this time spent together in the study of the book of Exodus. May the insights gained and the friendships deepened nourish us as we travel either through wilderness, promised land, exile, or return. In Jesus' name, Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Review of the Scripture Passage

Briefly review the events of Exodus 34:1–35.

4. Questions for Reflection

Turn to the Questions for Reflection on pp. 120–121 in the study book. Divide the class into four subgroups, assigning each group one of the questions to work on. Once everyone is back in the total group, have each subgroup report on their discussion.

Exploration (20 minutes)

5. *Covenant Renewal*

Note that after the Israelites murmured, complained, and asked for the golden calf, God responded not by abrogating but by renewing the covenant. Ask:

- What did the people do to deserve this? (Nothing.)
- What does this tell us about the character of God?

Point out that some churches have ceremonies for renewing wedding vows. Discuss the benefits of such rituals. Then remind participants that at a baptismal service, the pastor will often say to the congregation, “Remember your baptism.” This is a call to reflect on the vows that we (or our parents) took. Ask: In what ways does such a renewal of baptismal, wedding, or covenant vows serve to strengthen our relationships?

6. *God Agrees to Go with the People*

Say the following to the class:

After everything that had happened, the golden calf and all, Moses bowed his head and said, “If now I have found favor in your sight, O LORD, I pray, let the LORD go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance” (Ex. 34:9). And God agreed. God promised to be with them through wilderness, promised land, exile, and return.

Note that these categories of wilderness, promised land, exile, and return can apply to our own lives, as well. Give each person a piece of paper and crayons or markers. Ask them to depict where they are now in terms of these categories, or where they have been. Ask them to be sure to indicate where God is in the picture. Invite them to share their depictions, as far as they are comfortable, in groups of three.

7. *Understanding God and Self*

Have everyone take a piece of paper and draw three columns. They are to label the first “God,” the second “Moses,” and the third “People.” Ask them to fill in each column with words or phrases that characterize these three entities as revealed in Exodus. Then have everyone break into groups of three. Ask the triads to come to an agreed-upon list. Bring everyone back together, and have the triads share their final list with the total group.

Response (10 minutes)*8. Review*

Review the course by asking people to share their experiences, surprises, insights, questions, or any changes in meaning or understanding they have gained.

Closing (5 minutes)*9. Closing Prayer*

Use these words or others of your choice:

Let us pray. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen.