

Session 2: Without Excuse

Romans 1:18-32 · Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that Paul's indictment of the pagan world is not that people could not know God but that they did know him and suppressed it: creation itself makes God's power and deity plain, so idolatry is an exchange, not an accident, and God's judgment takes the form of handing people over to the desires they chose.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church teaches, with this passage as a principal warrant, that God can be known with certainty from created things by the natural light of human reason (CCC 31-32). Grace is necessary for salvation; the knowledge that a Creator exists lies within reason's in-principle reach (CCC 31-32), though fallen man in his concrete condition meets real obstacles and needs revelation even for truths reason could in principle attain (CCC 36-38). Paul and the Church stand together on creation's objective witness; how culpable any individual's unbelief is varies with circumstance, and only God judges hearts.

What You Need to Know

At 1:18 the letter pivots. Paul has announced that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel (1:17); now he announces that the wrath of God is also revealed, "against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth" (1:18). Wrath here is not a divine tantrum; it is the settled opposition of holy love to everything that destroys the beloved. Read the passage closely and notice that its verbs of judgment are strangely quiet. Three times the sentence of judgment is simply "God gave them up" (1:24, 26, 28). The primary punishment of sin, in this passage, is sin: getting, and becoming, what you chose.

The logic runs in a chain worth mastering before you lead it. What can be known about God is plain from what he has made (1:19-20). Knowing him, people neither honored him nor gave thanks (1:21). Refusing the truth did not leave a vacuum; it produced an exchange: the glory of the immortal God traded for images (1:23), the truth of God for a lie, worship of the creature rather than the Creator (1:25). Disordered worship then disorders everything downstream of it: mind, desire, body, society. The vice list at the end (1:29-31) is deliberately unglamorous; it descends from murder to gossip, envy, boasting, and disobeying parents. Paul is drawing a net around every reader, and the trap he is setting does not spring until the first verse of chapter 2. Do not spoil that turn tonight.

A pastoral word before you lead. Verses 26-27 name homosexual acts within this larger argument about exchanged worship, and someone in your group may carry this question personally. Teach what the Church teaches, without flinching and without cruelty: the Church holds that such acts are contrary to the natural law and cannot be approved, and in the same breath insists that persons with these inclinations "must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity" and that every sign of unjust discrimination is to be avoided (CCC 2357-2359). Keep the passage in its context: Paul's list runs on to greed, envy, gossip, and pride precisely so that no one in the room is left holding a stone. If the discussion narrows to a single sin, widen it back to Paul's actual target: every human heart that has traded the Creator for something smaller. Be alert to anyone for whom this lands heavily, and follow up personally rather than publicly.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Wisdom 13. Paul's argument in 1:19-23 tracks the Book of Wisdom's critique of idolatry so closely that the echo is audible line by line: from the good things that are seen, their Maker can be known, and those who missed him are without excuse. This is the strongest kind of evidence the study uses, a textual link anyone can verify with the two passages open. The group will find it themselves; do not reveal the reference in advance.

Psalm 106:19-20 and the golden calf. Paul's word "exchanged" (1:23) is Israel's own scar. The psalmist says of Sinai: "They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass" (Ps 106:20). Paul describes pagan idolatry in the vocabulary of Israel's worst hour, which quietly prepares his claim that Jew and Gentile stand in the same dock. A discovery passage; keep it back.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

St. Augustine put Paul's argument to the world itself. "Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea, question the beauty of the air... question all these realities. All respond: 'See, we are beautiful.' Their beauty is a profession. These beauties are subject to change. Who made them if not the Beautiful One who is not subject to change?" (Sermon 241, quoted in CCC 32). For St. Augustine the created world is not silent; it testifies, and the honest questioner hears it. That is Romans 1:20 turned into a prayer method.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. ATHANASIUS

St. Athanasius, in his work *Against the Pagans*, teaches in substance that idolatry is a fall in stages: the soul, made to contemplate God, turned its attention to itself and to the things of sense, and having lost the sight of God began to deify what it could see, first the heavens, then men, then images, then its own desires. He wrote it as a diagnosis of the pagan world, but he meant it as anatomy of every soul: worship never disappears, it only migrates. Paul's "exchanged" (1:23, 25) names the same migration.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. BONAVENTURE

St. Bonaventure teaches, in substance, that creation is like a book in which its Maker can be read: every creature a word, the whole world a text whose lines lead the attentive reader upward; recognizing the Writer as Trinity is faith's reading, since unaided reason cannot reach that mystery, but the book's legibility is tonight's point. The image, associated especially with his *Breviloquium* and his *Journey of the Mind to God*, is the constructive face of tonight's passage. Romans 1 says the book is legible and we shut it; St. Bonaventure spent his life teaching people to read it again.

Catechism Connection

CCC 31-32. The Catechism teaches that starting from creation and from the human person, there are converging and convincing "ways" by which man can come to know God with certainty; CCC 32 grounds the way of the physical world in this very passage, citing Rom 1:19-20 alongside Wisdom 13 and St. Augustine's Sermon 241.

CCC 2113. Idolatry is not only pagan statuary: "Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in place of God." The paragraph names power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, and money among the candidates. This is the bridge from Paul's first century to your group's Tuesday.

CCC 2357-2359 (leader's pastoral reference for vv. 26-27; see the note above). Teach the whole of it or none of it: the moral norm, the call to respect and compassion, and the universal call to chastity belong together.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

The trap. Everything in 1:18-32 is written to draw the reader into agreement just before 2:1 turns the indictment on the one agreeing. Session 3 springs it. Tonight, if someone says "this is about those people," note it, keep the chapter-2 turn sealed, and correct any demeaning or dehumanizing remark on the spot: every person in the passage and in the room keeps full dignity; only the discovery stays hidden, never charity.

Righteousness and wrath. 1:17 and 1:18 are parallel revelations. The righteousness of God thread picks up the wrath material in Session 4, where the same God who judges is the one who justifies.

Exchange language. "Exchanged" (1:23, 25) returns inverted in the gospel: what humanity traded away, God restores in Christ. Let the word lodge in the group's ear now; Session 6 (Adam and Christ) pays it off.

Sealed guess. Confirm quietly that everyone wrote and sealed a My Guess answer. Latecomers seal one this week. No peeking, no discussing contents.

Session Goals

1. The group can trace Paul's chain: creation reveals God, the truth is suppressed, worship is exchanged, and disorder follows worship.
2. The group discovers Wisdom 13 and Psalm 106:19-20 themselves and can say why the golden calf echo matters.
3. The group can explain "God gave them up" as judgment in the form of handed-over desire, not divine absence of mercy.
4. Each participant names one modern exchange, one creature they are tempted to serve in place of the Creator.

Timed Plan (75-90 minutes)

- Opening prayer and Win questions: 15 min
- Build questions 1-3 with the Wisdom 13 discovery: 30 min
- Build questions 4-5 with the Psalm 106 discovery and the steelman chain: 25 min
- Send questions, Live It This Week, memory verse, closing prayer: 15 min

If time runs short, pre-chosen cuts: drop the Dig Deeper box, and deliver the Psalm 106 link yourself in one sentence instead of running the second discovery. Never cut the Wisdom 13 discovery or the steelman answer.

Session 2: Without Excuse

Romans 1:18-32 · Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, your world is speaking; give us ears. Where we have traded you for smaller things, show us gently and firmly, and lead us home. Let your kindness, not our fear, do the leading. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win

1. Describe a moment when nature stopped you cold: a night sky, a coastline, a storm. What did it make you feel or want?
2. What is something harmless in itself that you have watched take over the center of someone's life?

Build

Read Romans 1:18-23 aloud.

1. Verses 19-20: what does Paul claim every human being can know, and how? What is the verdict in the last four words of verse 20?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse" (1:20). Not everything about God, but really God: his power and deity, perceived through what he made. The problem Paul diagnoses is therefore not lack of evidence. The verdict, "without excuse," only makes sense if the knowledge was genuinely available and genuinely refused.

2. Verse 21 is precise about the first failure. What two things did people fail to do, and what happened to their thinking as a result?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"Although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened" (1:21). The failure Paul lists first is doxological: no honor, no thanks. Ingratitude comes before idolatry, and the darkness comes after the refusal, not before it. That order matters: unbelief here is not the honest conclusion of a clear mind but the slow consequence of an unthankful one.

Discovery moment. Say: "Paul did not invent this argument. There is a book in the Old Testament, one Catholics have and most Protestant Bibles do not, that makes the same case almost line for line: the Maker known from the things made, and those who missed him left without excuse. It is one of the wisdom books. Find the chapter." Steer toward Wisdom 13 if they stall (hint: the book is named for what it is full of).

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Wisdom 13:1-9. "For all men who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know him who exists" (Wis 13:1), and "from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator" (Wis 13:5). Wisdom even weighs the excuse and rejects it: if they had power to know so much, how did they fail to find the Lord of all (13:9)? Paul, writing to Rome, closely echoes and may well be drawing on this deuterocanonical text. Let the group notice what that means: a book absent from Protestant Old Testaments is audibly underneath Romans 1.

3. Verse 23 says they "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images." Why exchange rather than, say, lost or forgot? What does the word accuse us of?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

An exchange is a transaction, a picture with a moment, a choice, and a price; and the possession it pictures is stated outright in 1:19-21: they knew God. Paul's word insists that idolatry begins in possession of the truth and trades it away for something manageable: an image resembling man or birds or animals or reptiles (1:23), something that will not make demands, something we can carry. Forgetting is a tragedy; exchanging is a decision.

Discovery moment. Say: "Paul chose 'exchanged the glory' for another reason. Israel's own songbook uses almost the same sentence about the worst morning in Israel's history, a morning involving gold and an animal. Find the psalm." Hint if needed: Psalms 105-106 retell Israel's story; look where the story reaches Mount Horeb.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Psalm 106:19-20: "They made a calf in Horeb and worshiped a molten image. They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass." Paul is describing pagan idolatry in the exact vocabulary of the golden calf. The move is quiet and devastating: the covenant people committed the textbook Gentile sin at the foot of Sinai itself. Paul is already dismantling any reader's confidence that this chapter is about other people. Say no more than that tonight; chapter 2 is coming.

Read Romans 1:24-32 aloud.

4. Three times Paul writes the sentence of judgment: "God gave them up" (1:24, 26, 28). What kind of judgment is that? What does God hand people over to?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

God gives them up "to the lusts of their hearts" (1:24), "to dishonorable passions" (1:26), "to a base mind" (1:28): in every case, to what they had already chosen. This is judgment as ratified freedom. God's wrath in this passage does not look like lightning; it looks like getting your own way, all the way down. The Fathers and moderns alike have observed that hell has this same structure. It is worth letting the group feel how frightening "God gave them up" is precisely because it is so quiet. If vv. 26-27 draw questions, answer plainly and pastorally: the Church teaches that these acts, like every act on Paul's longer list, are contrary to God's design, and she requires that the persons involved be received with respect, compassion,

and sensitivity (CCC 2357-2359). Then point to where Paul's own list goes next.

5. Read the vice list in 1:29-31 slowly. Where does it end up? Who is still standing outside this list?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

It ends in gossips, slanderers, the haughty, the boastful, the foolish, the faithless, the heartless, and those who disobey their parents (1:29-31). The list is built to reach past the spectacular sins into the common ones, so the reader who sailed through murder runs aground on envy or gossip, and the distance closes before 2:1. Verse 32 sharpens it: approving evil is itself the final rung. The chapter that began with pagan idols ends with sins that flourish in church pews, and that is not an accident. Do not resolve the tension; carry it into next week.

Steelman: Is Natural Knowledge of God Impossible?

Build it at full strength. Say to the group: "Here is a serious objection, held by thoughtful Reformed Christians and by many skeptics for opposite reasons. The Reformed version, at its most careful: creation truly reveals God, enough to leave everyone without excuse, but fallen man suppresses and distorts that witness, so natural theology yields no saving knowledge apart from Scripture; and some, following Barth, go further: fallen reason builds only idols out of arguments. The skeptic's version agrees on the conclusion from the other side: nature is ambiguous, religions disagree, so honest reason ends in doubt, and doubt cannot be blamed. Between them, both deny what the Church claims: that unaided reason really can know God from the world. And look around: if creation is so clear, why do sincere people miss it?" Let it land. Then press.

6. Press: Stay inside the passage. Does Paul say fallen people cannot know God from creation, or something stranger? Look at the verbs in verses 18, 21, 25.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Something stranger. They "suppress the truth" (1:18); "they knew God" (1:21); they "exchanged the truth about God for a lie" (1:25). You cannot suppress what never reached you, or exchange what you never possessed. Paul's diagnosis is not incapacity but refusal: the knowledge arrives and is held down. This is exactly the Church's position, defined at the First Vatican Council and taught at CCC 31-32: God can be known with certainty from created things by natural reason. That teaching does not claim everyone reasons their way to God, or that grace is unnecessary for faith and salvation; it claims that when a person does not find God, the world's testimony is not what failed. Be honest about what remains hard: culpability varies enormously with upbringing, wounds, and what a person has actually encountered, and only God judges hearts (the Church affirms invincible ignorance is real). Paul's target here is suppression, not honest struggle, and pastorally you should say so out loud.

DIG DEEPER

Wrath and love are not opposites. The opposite of love is not wrath but indifference. A God who watched his creatures trade themselves to destructive counterfeits and felt nothing would not be more loving; he would be less. A broad theological tradition reads God's wrath as the form his love takes when it meets what harms the beloved, and this passage's quiet triple "gave them up" shows a judgment that may, in providence, serve mercy: God lets the exchange run its course so its bankruptcy can be seen. The

far side of that severity is chapter 5, where the same wrath vocabulary returns with the words "but God shows his love for us."

Send

1. If worship never disappears but only migrates, where has yours migrated lately? Name the creature that gets your best attention, energy, and trust.
2. Verse 21 says the fall began with no honor and no thanks. What would it change to give God deliberate thanks every day this week, before anything is asked?

Live It This Week

- Each day, thank God out loud for three specific created things, and let each one point past itself to its Maker (Wis 13:5).
- Identify your strongest modern idol: a created good treated as ultimate, whose claim outranks God's in practice (your time, money, or anxiety may point to it). Fast from it once this week and give the hour to prayer.
- Reread the vice list (1:29-31) once, prayerfully, and let it read you. Bring what it finds to Confession if it has been a while.

Memory Verse

"Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse."

Romans 1:20 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Lord God, Maker of all that is beautiful, we have heard the world's testimony and we believe. Forgive our exchanges. Take back the throne we gave away, and teach us honor and thanks, the two things we owed first. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Session 2: Without Excuse

Leader Reference Card · Every Passage, In Order

- Romans 1:18-23 (read aloud: wrath revealed; creation's testimony; the exchange)
- Wisdom 13:1-9 (discovery passage: the Maker known from the things made; do not reveal in advance)
- Psalm 106:19-20 (discovery passage: the golden calf exchange; do not reveal in advance)
- Romans 1:24-32 (read aloud: God gave them up; the vice list)
- CCC 31-32, 2113 (Catechism Connection); CCC 2357-2359 (leader's pastoral reference)
- Memory verse: Romans 1:20