Leader's Guide

A few encouragements before digging in:

1. **The Leader's Guide is too long to follow step by step. I offer it to help you personalize the material through prayer and reflection before you arrive at your fellowship. In other words, making it your own requires time to absorb it.**

2. **Use some or none of it. I suggest highlighting the sections that are helpful and ignoring the sections you already grasp or consider irrelevant.**

3. **Nothing replaces prayer. Nothing replaces sustained attention to the primary scriptural text and supporting texts. In short, no one can "wing it." No one should expect clarity and clear communication skills without undistracted attention to the Lord who stands in and behind the texts.**

4. **While I do not know most of you, I spend a great deal of time praying for you to be "useful to the Master." None of us, in our own strength or personality, or business acumen are adequate to the task. We must depend upon the Spirit for understanding and winsome communication skills.**

5. **Many continued blessings as you seek to serve our Lord.**

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<u>Questions Encore: Does God Send Innocent People to Hell?</u>

Primary Scriptures: Psalm 19:1–3; Romans 1:18–21; Romans 2:14–16; Romans 3:9–26

Central Truth: God does not condemn innocent people for failing to believe a message they have never heard. Rather, all humanity stands guilty before God because we suppress the knowledge of him that he has made known. Yet the same God who justly judges sinners has graciously provided salvation through Jesus Christ.

Leader's objective: Help participants move from questioning God's justice to understanding humanity's guilt, God's perfect justice, and the amazing grace and mercy offered through Christ.

1. Opening the Conversation: Golf and Our Sense of Justice

Study Question 1

Imagine discovering that the winner of your club championship had deliberately cheated throughout the tournament. Would you consider disqualification an appropriate response? Why do we insist on justice when others break the rules, yet often resist the idea of God judging our own wrongdoing?

Suggested discussion:

Begin by encouraging the group to discuss cheating in golf. Most golfers have strong feelings about someone who knowingly violates the rules to gain an advantage.

Move the conversation toward the moral principle underneath the illustration: We instinctively recognize that wrongdoing deserves accountability.

Yet we often apply one standard to others and another to ourselves.

We demand justice when someone cheats us, lies to us, or mistreats us. But when confronted with our own failures, we appeal to circumstances, good intentions, or our otherwise respectable behavior.

Biblical connections:

- Romans 2:1–3 — We condemn in others the very sins of which we ourselves are guilty.
- Romans 3:23 — All have sinned and fall short of God's glory.

An important biblical distinction:

The golf analogy illustrates moral accountability, but God's judgment is infinitely more significant than a tournament committee's decision.

God is not merely enforcing an arbitrary set of regulations. His law reflects his own perfectly holy character. **Sin is therefore not simply rule-breaking; it is rebellion against our Creator.**

2. General Revelation: God Has Made Himself Known

Study Question 2

Romans 1:18–21 teaches that God has made himself known through creation, yet humanity suppresses that truth. What is the difference between not knowing something and refusing to acknowledge something we know? Why does Paul consider humanity's problem moral rather than merely intellectual?

This is the heart of the devotional and deserves the primary focus.

A. God's revelation is universal and unmistakable.

Read Romans 1:19–20; Pslam19.

Paul makes several claims about humanity's knowledge of God.

- God has made himself known. The knowledge of God is not something humanity must discover independently. God has taken the initiative to reveal himself.
- His revelation is clear. Paul says God's invisible attributes have been clearly perceived through creation.
- His revelation reaches its intended audience. Romans 1:21 declares, "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God."
- His revelation leaves humanity accountable. Paul concludes that people are "without excuse."

General revelation is not merely an opportunity to know God. It is an actual revelation of God that reaches every human being.

Psalm 19 reinforces this truth. Creation continually proclaims God's glory without human speech.

B. Humanity's problem is suppression, not innocent ignorance.

Read Romans 1:18.

The key word is "suppress."

Paul does not describe humanity as merely lacking sufficient information. He describes people who actively hold down the truth in unrighteousness.

The problem is not the absence of evidence. It is the sinful disposition of the human heart toward God.

An important qualification: This does not mean every person consciously thinks, "I know Christianity is true, but I refuse to admit it." Paul's claim is more fundamental: humanity genuinely knows the Creator while resisting the worship and obedience that knowledge demands.

C. General revelation establishes accountability but does not communicate the saving gospel.

This distinction is essential.

Creation reveals God's eternal power and divine nature. Conscience bears witness to moral accountability (Romans 2:14–16).

But neither creation nor conscience communicates the saving message of Christ's death and resurrection.

Romans 10:13–17 explains why proclaiming the gospel is necessary.

People are not condemned merely for lacking information about Jesus. They are condemned for sin. And salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

Leader's takeaway: The tragedy of the human condition is not that God has remained silent, but that humanity refuses to honor the God who has spoken.

3. The Cross: Where Perfect Justice Meets Extraordinary Mercy

Study Question 3

Romans 3:21–26 teaches that God is both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus. How does the cross demonstrate both God's perfect justice and his extraordinary mercy? How might this change the way we think about the question, "How could a loving God send anyone to hell?"

A. God cannot simply ignore evil.

Ask the group:

Would we consider a judge good if he knowingly let guilty criminals escape punishment simply to appear loving?

Most people would say no.

A judge who ignores evil is not demonstrating moral excellence.

This raises the central question of Romans 3: How can God forgive sinners without compromising his own righteousness?

Paul's answer is the cross of Jesus Christ.

B. Jesus satisfies the demands of divine justice.

Read Romans 3:24–26.

Here, Paul explains that God justifies sinners by grace through the redemption accomplished in Christ.

Jesus bears the penalty for sin, demonstrating God's righteousness while forgiving those who believe.

God does not pretend sin never happened.

Nor does he abandon his holiness to be merciful.

In Christ, divine justice is satisfied, and divine mercy is extended.

This is the heart of substitutionary atonement.

Second Corinthians 5:21 provides a helpful companion passage: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

C. The gospel reverses the original question.

Return to the devotional’s concluding question:

Why would a perfectly holy God offer forgiveness to people who have knowingly revolted against him?

This question moves us from accusing God of injustice to marveling at his grace.

It announces that guilty people can be forgiven because Jesus Christ has accomplished what they could never accomplish for themselves.

Leader’s takeaway: The cross demonstrates that God’s justice and love are not competing attributes. Both are gloriously revealed in the saving work of Christ.

4. Anticipating Difficult Questions

Because some participants may not be Christians, leaders should be prepared for thoughtful objections. Welcome these questions rather than dismissing them.

Objection: “But what about a genuinely good person who has never heard about Jesus?”

Acknowledge the emotional weight of the question.

Then explain that Scripture distinguishes between relative human goodness and perfect righteousness before God.

People can do genuinely good things, show kindness, and behave honorably toward others. But none of these accomplishments erases their sin against God.

Romans 3:9–20 establishes humanity’s universal guilt.

The question is not whether some people behave better than others. They certainly do. The question is whether anyone meets God’s standard of perfect righteousness.

Paul’s answer is no.

Objection: “Isn’t it unfair to judge someone who never had the opportunity to hear the gospel?”

Distinguish carefully between the basis of condemnation and the means of salvation.

The basis of condemnation is sin, not the absence of gospel knowledge.

Romans 1–2 teaches that people possess genuine knowledge of God and moral accountability, even without possessing the Scriptures.

God's judgment is perfectly righteous and takes account of the revelation people have received (Romans 2:14–16).

However, the gospel is God's appointed means of announcing salvation through Christ (Romans 10:13–17).

We should avoid claiming to know the eternal destiny of any individual. We can affirm both God's perfect justice and the necessity of Christ's saving work without pretending Scripture answers every hypothetical case.

Objection: "If God is loving, why doesn't he simply forgive everyone?"

This is an excellent opportunity to explore the relationship between love and justice.

Love does not require indifference toward evil.

Indeed, a God who was indifferent toward injustice would hardly be worthy of worship.

The extraordinary claim of Christianity is that God himself has provided the sacrifice necessary for sinners to be reconciled to him.

Romans 5:8 reminds us that God demonstrated his love while we were still sinners.

The gospel therefore announces something far greater than divine tolerance. It announces costly, undeserved mercy.

Conclusion

I would encourage leaders not to end the discussion with the doctrine of hell, but with the glory of the gospel.

The central purpose of Romans 1–3 is not merely to establish universal human guilt. Paul is preparing the way for his announcement [good news] in Romans 3:21:

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law…"

Those two words, "But now," mark one of the great turning points in Paul's argument.

Humanity stands guilty. Every mouth is stopped. No one can claim righteousness before God.

But now, God has acted in Jesus Christ.

The answer to human guilt is not greater moral effort, religious achievement, or a more favorable comparison with other people.

The answer is Jesus Christ.

A leader might conclude with this question:

We've spent considerable time asking whether God is fair to judge sinners. But what if the most important question is why God would love sinners enough to send his own Son to save them?

That is where the conversation should end—not merely with the certainty of God's judgment, but with an invitation to receive his mercy.

REMEMBER! The most important thing is to spend significant time in prayerful study to make this real in your heart and mind.