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February 18th: Jeremiah 48 & Romans 3

February 17, 2021



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Judgment upon Moab. God being just and the justifier of the one who has the faith of Jesus.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 48, concerning Moab. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Woe to Nebo, for it is laid waste. Kiriatheim is put to shame.

It is taken. The fortress is put to shame and broken down. The renown of Moab is no more.

In Heshbon they plan disaster against her. Come, let us cut her off from being a nation. You also, O madmen, shall be brought to silence.

The sword shall pursue you. A voice, a cry from Horonaim. Desolation and great destruction.

Moab is destroyed. Her little ones have made a cry. For at the ascent of Luhith they go

up weeping.

For at the descent of Horonaim they have heard the distressed cry of destruction. Flee, save yourselves. You will be like a juniper in the desert.

For because you trusted in your works and your treasures, you also shall be taken. And Chemosh shall go into exile with his priests and his officials. The destroyer shall come upon every city, and no city shall escape.

The valleys shall perish, and the plains shall be destroyed, as the Lord has spoken. Give wings to Moab, for she would fly away. Her cities shall become a desolation, with no inhabitant in them.

Cursed is he who does the work of the Lord with slackness, and cursed is he who keeps back his sword from bloodshed. Moab has been at ease from his youth, and has settled on his dregs. He has not been emptied from vessel to vessel, nor has he gone into exile.

So his taste remains in him, and his scent is not changed. Therefore behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I shall send to him pourers who will pour him, and empty his vessels and break his jars in pieces. Then Moab shall be ashamed of Chemosh, as the house of Israel was ashamed of Bethel, their confidence.

How do you say, we are heroes and mighty men of war? The destroyer of Moab and his cities has come up, and the choicest of his young men have gone down to slaughter, declares the king, whose name is the Lord of hosts. The calamity of Moab is near at hand, and his affliction hastens swiftly. Grieve for him, all you who are around him, and all who know his name.

Say, how the mighty scepter is broken, the glorious staff. Come down from your glory, and sit on the parched ground, O inhabitant of Dibon. For the destroyer of Moab has come up against you, he has destroyed your strongholds.

Stand by the way and watch, O inhabitant of Oza. Ask him who flees, and her who escapes. Say, what has happened? Moab is put to shame, for it is broken.

Wail and cry, tell it beside the Anon, that Moab is laid waste. Judgment has come upon the Tableland, upon Holon and Jazer, and Methiath and Dibon and Nebo, and Beth-Dib-Lathaim, and Kiriathaim, and Beth-Gamal, and Beth-Meon, and Kiriath, and Bozra, and all the cities of the land of Moab far and near. The horn of Moab is cut off, and his arm is broken, declares the Lord.

Make him drunk, because he magnified himself against the Lord, so that Moab shall wallow in his vomit, and he too shall be held in derision. Was not Israel a derision to you? Was he found among thieves, that whenever you spoke of him you wagged your head? Leave the cities and dwell in the rock, O inhabitants of Moab. Be like the dove that nests

in the sides of the mouth of a gorge.

We have heard of the pride of Moab. He is very proud, of his loftiness, his pride, and his arrogance, and the haughtiness of his heart. I know his insolence, declares the Lord.

His boasts are false, his deeds are false. Therefore I wail for Moab, I cry out for all Moab. For the men of Kir-Harasseth I mourn.

More than for Jazar I weep for you, O vine of Sidmar. Your branches, passed over the sea, reached to the sea of Jazar. On your summer fruits and your grapes the destroyer has fallen.

Gladness and joy have been taken away from the fruitful land of Moab. I have made the wine cease from the wine-presses. No one treads them with shouts of joy.

The shouting is not the shout of joy. From the outcry at Heshbon, even to Eliella, as far as Jehaz they utter their voice. From Zoar to Horonim and Eglash-Shalishia.

For the waters of Nimrim have become desolate, and I will bring to an end in Moab, declares the Lord. Him who offers sacrifice in the high place, and makes offerings to his God. Therefore my heart moans for Moab like a flute, and my heart moans like a flute for the men of Kir-Harasseth.

Therefore the riches they gained have perished. For every head is shaved and every beard cut off. On all the hands are gashes, and around the waist is sackcloth.

On all the housetops of Moab, and in the squares, there is nothing but lamentation. For I have broken Moab like a vessel, for which no one cares, declares the Lord. How it is broken! How they wail! How Moab has turned his back in shame! So Moab has become a derision, and a horror to all that are around him.

For thus says the Lord, Behold one shall fly swiftly like an eagle, and spread his wings against Moab. The cities shall be taken, and the strongholds seized. The heart of the warriors of Moab shall be in that day, like the heart of a woman in her birth pains.

Moab shall be destroyed, and be no longer a people, because he magnified himself against the Lord. Terror, pit, and snare are before you, O inhabitant of Moab, declares the Lord. He who flees from the terror shall fall into the pit, and he who climbs out of the pit shall be caught in the snare.

For I will bring these things upon Moab, the year of their punishment, declares the Lord. In the shadow of Heshbon, fugitives stop without strength. For fire came out from Heshbon, flame from the house of Sihon.

It has destroyed the forehead of Moab, the crown of the sons of Tumult. Woe to you, O Moab! The people of Kemosh are undone, for your sons have been taken captive, and

your daughters into captivity. Yet I will restore the fortunes of Moab in the latter days, declares the Lord.

Thus far is the judgment on Moab. From the Philistines to the west of Judah, Jeremiah chapter 48 moves to the Moabites to the east of Judah. Moab was on a plateau east of the Dead Sea, about 3,000 feet in elevation.

The precise boundaries of the land have been much debated. Many have seen the main body of the territory of Moab lying between the rivers Zered and Anon. However, many of the Moabite cities mentioned are north of the Anon.

The people of Moab descended from Lot, from his incestuous relationship with one of his daughters. Balak, the king of Moab, had earlier summoned Balaam to curse the Israelites. The Israelites had taken some of the former territory of Moab from Sihon king of the Amorites, with Reuben and Gad settling in that part of the Transjordan.

These tribes, along with the half-tribe of Manasseh, were taken captive by the Assyrians, of whom the Moabites were vassals from the first half of the 8th century BC. The greatest source of information about Moab is the biblical text itself, although the Moabite stone, or the Mesha Stele of around 840 BC, found at the site of Dibon, tells of the Moabites' escape from the yoke of Israel. Ruth, famously, was a Moabiteess.

Moab was present at the conference of 594 BC, so Jeremiah might have delivered some of the prophecies directly to the Moabite ambassador in Jerusalem. The subjugation of Moab occurred in 582 BC, but Nebuchadnezzar had used Moab to harass Judah back in 599-598 BC. This is recorded in 2 Kings 24 verses 1-2.

In his days, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up, and Jehoiachin became his servant for three years. Then he turned and rebelled against him, and the Lord sent against him bands of the Chaldeans, and bands of the Syrians, and bands of the Moabites, and bands of the Ammonites, and sent them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by his servants the prophets. The material from verse 29 of this chapter has very close parallels in places like Isaiah chapter 15 verse 16 and chapter 24.

Jeremiah, or possibly the editors of the book of Jeremiah, are using and developing traditional material concerning the nation of Moab. The chapter begins with woes upon a number of different places, describing the desolation that's going to come upon them. Nebo, most famously, was the site from which Moses had seen the land from the far side of the Jordan.

However, now Nebo, along with a number of the other of the major cities of Moab, are being brought down. They're going to be silenced. They're going to experience disaster.

They're going to be cut off. They're going to be put to shame and broken down. The

series of place names and the list of the disasters that are going to befall them gives us a sense of the comprehensive judgment that is going to fall upon the Moabites.

The pride of the land is going to be humbled, and here, as elsewhere in the chapter, is going to provoke great mourning. While the city of Madmen will be put to silence, in verse 3 to 5 there is a series of cries, the cry of desolation and great destruction from Harunayim. Elsewhere it will be the sound of the crying of orphaned children.

At Luhith people will go up weeping. The Moabites are counseled to flee to save their lives. The judgment that's about to befall them is coming upon them because of their pride and their arrogant self-confidence.

They trusted in their works and in their treasures, and they and their god, his priests and his officials, are all going to go into captivity. This likely refers to events of 582 BC. The god Chemosh was worshipped under various names.

He seems to be the same deity as Nergal of the Babylonians. Carchemish is also named after Chemosh. Solomon most famously built a high place for Chemosh in 1 Kings 11, verses 7 and 33.

Verse 10 expresses a curse upon the one who does the work of the Lord with slackness. What is this work? It's the judgment upon Moab. The bearer of the sword has been given his task, and he must do it with diligence and speed.

This underlines the fact that the Lord is the one that is bringing this judgment upon Moab and its god. Moab and its table land were important wine-growing regions, and so the prophecy against Moab uses a number of different illustrations from winemaking. Moab is described as a settled place, and the prophecy compares it to wine that has settled on its dregs, or its sediment.

Leaving the wine with the dregs was part of the necessary process of fermentation. Left for longer, it would produce highly refined wine. But here one gets the sense that Moab is wine that has been left too long on its lees.

It should have been removed. However, since Moab has remained on its sediment for so long, it has not been moved around or uprooted and sent into exile, it has a very distinct flavor of its own, undiluted by other peoples. However, the Lord is about to perform the task that is overdue.

He is going to send porers, and he is going to take the wine of Moab and move it into different jars, breaking the old vessels of Moab, presumably the cities in which Moab has long felt secure. This will be a humiliation not just for Moab, but for Chemosh, their god. The northern kingdom of Israel had been made ashamed of Bethel, their cultic site that was set up by Jeroboam I. When the Assyrians came upon them in the first half of the 8th century, their worship proved powerless to protect them.

One can imagine this being a cautionary example to Judah in the south, which had put a vain faith for so long in its mere possession of the temple. In verse 14, the boast of the Moabite men is recorded. They think themselves great heroes and valorous men of war, but the emptiness of their boast is about to be exposed.

The destroyer appointed for Moab has come upon them, and Moab's proud young men have perished. The following verses describe the outcome of the calamity and the lamentation that follows. Peoples once enthroned in powerful cities must come down and sit on the parched earth.

People by the wayside will see people fleeing from the destruction and will hear the tidings of the downfall of Moab and its power. Verses 21-24 give a litany of the cities that have suffered this destruction. Moab's horn is cut off and his arm is broken.

These are both symbols of strength and might. Moab is also made drunk so it will suffer a downfall. The once haughty Moab, that mocked at Israel, will suffer the indignity of wallowing in its own vomit.

We might here recall the imagery of Jeremiah 25, verses 15-17. Thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me, Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them.

So I took the cup from the Lord's hand, and made all the nations to whom the Lord sent me drink it. Verse 27 is difficult to read. Jack Lumbum suggests that we could read it as follows.

Then surely the joke is for you, Israel, if among thieves he has been found. For more than all your words against him you will shake your head. Moab had once treated Israel as an object of derision.

But now the Lord invites his own people to mock Moab, as they have been utterly humiliated. Verse 29 to the end of the chapter seems to reuse and develop traditional material, particularly that found in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah chapter 16, verse 6 to 12.

We have heard of the pride of Moab, how proud he is, of his arrogance, his pride, and his insolence. In his idle boasting he is not right. Therefore let Moab wail for Moab, let everyone wail.

Mourn utterly stricken for the raisin cakes of Ker-Haraseth. For the fields of Heshbon languish, and the vine of Sibmeh. The lords of the nations have struck down its branches, which reach to Jeza, and stray to the desert.

Its shoots spread abroad and passed over the sea. Therefore I weep with the weeping of Jeza for the vine of Sibmeh. I drench you with my tears, O Heshbon and Eliela.

For over your sum of fruit and your harvest the shout has ceased, and joy and gladness are taken away from the fruitful field. And in the vineyards no songs are sung, no cheers are raised, no treader treads out wine in the presses. I have put an end to the shouting.

Therefore my inner parts moan like a liar for Moab, and my inmost self for Ker-Haraseth. And when Moab presents himself, when he wearies himself on the high place, when he comes to his sanctuary to pray, he will not prevail. Then again in Isaiah chapter 15 verses 2-7, He has gone up to the temple and to Dibon, to the high places to weep.

Over Nebo and over Medeba Moab wails. On every head is baldness, every beard is shorn. In the streets they wear sackcloth, on the housetops and in the squares.

Everyone wails and melts in tears. Heshbon and Eliella cry out. Their voice is heard as far as Jehaz.

Therefore the armed men of Moab cry aloud. His soul trembles. My heart cries out for Moab.

Her fugitives flee to Zoar, to Eglash-Shelishia. For at the ascent of Lutheth they go up weeping. On the road to Horeneum they raise a cry of destruction.

The waters of Nimrim are a desolation. The grass is withered, the vegetation fails. The greenery is no more.

Therefore the abundance they have gained, and what they have laid up they carry away over the brook of the willows. Moab, in verse 29, is distinguished by its pride, its haughtiness. The Lord brings low the proud, and Moab is no exception.

Moab's great boasts will ring hollow and be proved empty. The Lord takes up a lament for Moab, likely a mocking lament. Once again the prophecy focuses upon Moab as a wine-producing region.

Its vineyards are going to be destroyed. Places that once rang with the sound of people treading the wine are now either silenced or ringing out with shouts of destruction. Verses 34-39 once again describe a situation of lamentation.

The Lord describes his heart as moaning for Moab like a flute. Once again this is likely a mocking description. All the people of Moab are taking up a great lamentation.

They are practicing the rites and the customs associated with funerals. The Lord is playing the funeral flutes. They are shaving their head, cutting off their beards.

They are cutting themselves for the dead, and they are wearing sackcloth. The judgment coming upon them is coming upon them speedily, swooping down upon them like an eagle flying from the north. In the face of this destruction they will be like a woman, crying out and lacking in strength in the midst of her birth pangs.

Once again we are told that the judgment is coming upon Moab because of its pride, precisely because Moab magnified itself against the Lord. The language of Isaiah chapter 24 verses 17-18 is taken up here. Terror and the pit and the snare are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth.

He who flees at the sound of the terror shall fall into the pit, and he who climbs out of the pit shall be caught in the snare, for the windows of heaven are opened, and the foundations of the earth tremble. Moab is doomed. Even if they think that they have escaped, they have escaped only to fall into a greater trap.

Back in the Book of Numbers, Balak, the king of Moab, had summoned the prophet Balaam to curse Israel. In response, Balaam had not cursed Israel but had blessed her. Some of Balaam's words are taken up here.

Numbers chapter 21 verses 28-29 For fire came out from Heshbon, flame from the city of Sihon. It devoured Ah of Moab and swallowed the heights of the Anon. Woe to you, O Moab! You are undone, O people of Chemosh.

He has made his sons fugitives and his daughters captives to an Amorite king, Sihon. And then in chapter 24 verse 17 I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near.

A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel. It shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth. Verses 45-46 take up this imagery.

The fire that was mentioned coming out from Heshbon back in Numbers is going to come out again and it's going to destroy the forehead of Moab as described in Numbers chapter 24. However the prophecy ends on a promising note. Even after all of these things that befall them, Moab will be restored.

A question to consider. What might the prophet mean by speaking of Moab magnifying himself against the Lord? What sort of actions and attitudes might this have involved? Romans chapter 3 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.

What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means. Let God be true, though everyone were a liar, as it is written, that you may be justified in your words and prevail when you are judged. But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? I speak in a human way.

By no means. For then how could God judge the world? But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come? As some people slanderously charge us with saying, their

condemnation is just. What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all.

For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written, none is righteous, no not one. No one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless.

No one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips.

Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood. In their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.

There is no fear of God before their eyes. Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law, no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested, apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it. The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just, and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded.

By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith, apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one who will justify the circumcised by faith, and the uncircumcised through faith, do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means.

On the contrary, we uphold the law. In Romans chapter 3 we arrive at one of the richest chapters of the apostle Paul's writings, but a chapter that is very complex and challenging in many ways. If we are reading Paul carefully and intelligently, we should be able to anticipate some of the movement of his argument, much as Paul is anticipating the objections of his imagined interlocutor.

Truly to understand the passage of scripture, we need to understand the movement of thought that leads from one verse or argument to the next. Too many people read scripture as if it were a succession of temporally disjointed tones, rather than the flow of a single piece of music through time. At the end of chapter 2 we should have guessed

that the natural response to Paul's relativisation of circumcision, his statement that circumcision becomes uncircumcision for breakers of the law, and that the uncircumcision of the Gentile who keeps the law would be counted as circumcision, the natural objection to that would be that this denies the advantage given to Israel in the covenant, and it denies the value of circumcision.

If we anticipated this, then we are reading him well, as these are precisely the points that Paul turns to address here. Paul is not denying that the Jewish people enjoyed great privileges on account of circumcision, most especially the fact that God entrusted his revelation to them, above all other peoples. God had given them the scriptures, and he had given them promises.

And even though many of the Jewish people were unfaithful, this doesn't mean that God himself was unfaithful to his promises. These remain certain. Indeed, far from the faithlessness of Israel nullifying God's faithfulness, the glory of God's gracious faithfulness was, if anything, seen even more powerfully against the backdrop of Israel's unfaithfulness.

This leads, however, to another natural objection. If it is indeed the case that Israel's unrighteousness and unfaithfulness serve to reveal God's faithfulness and righteousness more fully, why should God bring judgment upon and condemn sin? It seems that sin has served his purposes. This identifies a crucial problem that Pauline theology has to address.

If God's grace occurs entirely apart from human merit, and indeed is most powerfully manifested in the very contrast between the judgment that our sins merit and the undeserved goodness that he bestows, doesn't this cast divine justice and the moral order of the universe into question? Indeed, taking this to its logical conclusion, if our sins are the very things that make God's grace appear more glorious, why shouldn't we pursue evil so that God's grace might be seen most fully? In the previous two chapters, Paul has made amply clear that God is concerned for the moral order of the universe. His wrath is revealed from heaven against the unrighteousness of men, and the thoughts and actions of men will be judged on a coming day by Jesus Christ, according to Paul's gospel. On that last day, people will be judged according to works, and those who by patience and well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality will be given eternal life.

However, how to hold together God's concern for the moral order of the world, where judgment is according to works, and the radical grace of God which is given entirely apart from works, is a real question. N.T. Wright notices that Paul's questions here reappear later in the letter in various forms, in chapters 9-11, where they receive fuller answers. This is something that we see on a number of occasions in Paul, where arguments can be recapitulated later in some fuller or different form, helping us to get a

firmer grip upon what he is saying.

Paul gives a lot of his argument for the whole book of Romans in a nutshell in this chapter, and then he unpacks it at a later point. Understanding of truth often arises from appreciation of the relationship and interplay between the condensed and the expounded presentation of a truth, or the fundamental common logic that binds two realities together, or the different facets of a single reality. And Paul's recapitulated arguments may be designed to help to strengthen our grasp upon fundamental truths in such a manner.

Paul began this chapter by answering the question of whether Israel enjoyed any privilege on account of circumcision and its possession of the law. He gave a positive answer to that. However, a somewhat different question surfaces here.

Are the Jews better off in more absolute terms? Does their possession of the law and circumcision mean that they are somehow better than every other people, somehow free from the dominion of sin and death, somehow immune to God's wrath declared against all unrighteousness of men? And to this question, the answer must be no. As Paul has already maintained, Jews and Gentiles alike are under sin. Paul proceeds to present a catena of scriptural quotations to substantiate his point.

Within these quotations he presents a portrait of the wicked, one that applies across the classes of Jews and Gentiles. From the initial general charge of unrighteousness, he moves to people's spiritual blindness, their failure to seek after God, their turning aside into sin and wickedness, the destructive and violent character of their speech and their ways, and their utter lack of the fear of God. He also shows how various parts of the body are conscripted for the cause of wickedness.

Such a portrayal might perhaps remind us of the characterization of the wicked prior to the Flood in Genesis 6.5. The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. Paul, as usual when he is remixing scripture in such a manner, is very mindful of the wider contexts from which he is drawing. We need to beware of abstracting his quotations from their original contexts, especially as those original contexts can undermine certain ways in which people presume that Paul is using these quotations here.

For instance, in Psalm 14, verses 1-3, which Paul uses, read as follows. But verses 4-5 that come after it read as follows. There they are in great terror, for God is with the generation of the righteous.

Clearly the statement that there is no one righteous needs to be qualified in some sense, because the text that Paul is quoting refers to people as righteous. However, here we should notice the general nature of the characterization of humanity that begins the

psalm that Paul quotes. The human race more generally is characterized by a sort of practical atheism, by foolishly acting as if there were no God in heaven to judge.

The statement isn't exclusively made about the Gentiles. It's more comprehensive than that. It includes Jews under it.

The righteous here are like Noah, who find favour in the sight of God. Their existence is somehow anomalous, though, because it isn't as if they are somehow without the sins that lead to the condemnation of their fellows. For instance, even after the flood in Genesis 8, verse 21, the Lord repeats the characterization of mankind that provoked the destruction of mankind in the first place.

I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Even the humanity rescued through the flood are fundamentally marked by this evil intention of the heart. And it seems to be the same thing here.

Although there may be some who are described as righteous, they are not described as righteous as people who are immune from that characteristic. All of these scriptures serve to silence mankind before God, rendering all, Jew and Gentile alike, accountable before him. By the works of the law, Paul claims, no flesh will be justified in God's sight.

Paul refers to humanity here as all flesh, and the term flesh is by no means a neutral term for Paul. It foregrounds human weakness, corruptibility, mortality and rebellion. Flesh is not just humanity as such, it's humanity under these particular conditions.

The law doesn't grant some immunity to God's judgment upon sin. Quite the opposite, the law itself, as the verses Paul has just cited illustrate, condemns man. The law has the effect of bringing sin to light.

So it is simply not the case that the works of the law could justify. What are the works of the law that Paul has in view here? Historically, many, particularly Protestants, have regarded the works of the law as deeds performed to accrue merit before God, as if we could earn God's favour by good deeds. However, I don't believe that that is what is in view here, and there have always been Protestants who have held a contrary view to this, holding that it refers to something more particular, ceremonies of the law, or something like that.

It seems to me that that's closer to the truth. Paul's emphasis in this context is upon teaching that Jews are not excluded from the general judgment upon all flesh. The works of the law are those things that Jews would have believed set them apart from the Gentiles, putting them in a better position in absolute terms relative to God's condemnation of sin, on account of the fact that God gave them the law and the covenant.

In particular, the works of the law are those practices like circumcision and the dietary

requirements, those things that set Jews apart from the Gentiles, marking them out as people of the law. However, as Paul highlights here, that does no good, because rather than rendering those under it immune to God's judgment upon sin, the law itself brings sin to light and condemns it. It's a means of the very judgment that some presume to escape by being marked out by it.

Having presented the problem, Paul now declares God's response. While many present the Book of Romans as principally being about man's problem and God's solution in the way of salvation, it is worth considering the way in which the book is more about God's problem and God's solution to his own problem. The problems that Paul has emphasised at this point are less problems on man's side of the equation, though it is clearly shown that we have no shortage of these, but rather the problems that God faces.

So God must be a just and impartial judge. He must judge Jews and Gentiles alike. He must judge according to truth.

For instance, in Exodus 23, verse 7, he commands, If God will not acquit the wicked, and indeed to acquit the wicked would be contrary to his very nature, how can he justify the ungodly? It seems we have a problem. However, God has, on the other hand, made promises to Israel, promises declaring his intention to save, and to save not just Jews but also Gentiles. How can God do this and still be righteous? Paul now presents God's solution.

The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law. God has revealed his saving justice at this climactic point in history. It is not a timeless way of salvation.

Rather, it's a timely act of God in history. It has been manifested apart from the Torah. It wasn't the law itself that accomplished God's saving justice, his setting of the world to rights.

God's saving justice has also been revealed in a way that overrides the division and distinction in humanity established by the Torah. It comes to both Jews and Gentiles alike, rather than being exclusive to the former. However, while being manifested apart from the law, the law and the prophets testify to it.

They foretell and foreshadow it in many and various ways. There is a consistency between God's former revelation in the law and the prophets, and God's revelation of his saving justice in Christ and the new covenant. This saving justice is manifested through, literally, the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe.

There has been considerable debate concerning whether the faith of Jesus Christ refers to faith in Jesus Christ, the most common position, or the faith or faithfulness of Jesus Christ himself, or perhaps even to Christ-faith, faith with a quality that is grounded in, ordered towards, and constituted by Christ. In the next chapter we read, for instance, of

the faith of Abraham, which refers both to Abraham's own faith, but also to the faith of the sons of Abraham who believe like their father. Christ-faith, or Christian faith, is, I believe, something similar.

It's a Christ-shaped faith, a form of life first exemplified in Christ, to which we are conformed. It is through this faith that God's saving justice, his righteous setting of the world to rights, and establishment of his just moral order and fulfilment of his promises, is accomplished. It is fulfilled through the rich and the multifaceted reality of what faith represents.

So on the one hand, faith stands for the faithfulness of Christ himself, a faithfulness by which we are reconstituted and into which we are formed by the Spirit. It also stands for the way that faith correlates to divine promise and free gift, in contradistinction to the way that obedience correlates to the commands of the law. Faith receives through trusting receipt of a free gift.

We should be careful here of the way that some would try to redefine faith as faithfulness, in a way that dulls our awareness of the correlation between faith and free gift, and faith and promise. That aspect of faith is very important to Paul. Faith also stands for something that, in contrast to the Torah and its works, is open to all humanity, Jew and Gentile alike.

And in the verses that follow, Paul refracts some of this rich reality that the term faith represents. So first, faith upholds the fact that there is ultimately no distinction between Jew and Gentile. All have fallen short of God's glory, and receive a good standing with God on the basis of a free gift, given without regard to whether they are Jew or Gentile.

Second, it is a free gift received through the empty hands of faith, rather than something obtained through obedience. Third, it is accomplished by Christ's faithfulness, upon which our new Christian existence depends. God put Jesus forward as a mercy seat, a place of atonement and covering for sin.

Christ is the great sin offering, who takes sin upon himself. In Christ, God deals with sin in a way that it must be dealt with. Sin is taken seriously in Christ.

He has passed over sin until the point of Christ. The sacrificial system, for instance, did not finally deal with sin. It put sin into a great sort of cosmic pending tray, waiting for it to be dealt with.

And that great sacrificial act that was awaited by which it would finally be dealt with occurs in Christ. On the basis of this event, God can be both just, and declare people of faith constituted by God's work in Christ to be in the right, to be persons in good standing with him. This statement, on the basis of what Christ has accomplished, can be a statement made in accordance with truth.

As Paul will go on to show in this letter, God can uphold the moral order of the universe, even as he declares people who are sinners, Jews and Gentiles, to be right before him, and can make that judgment according to truth, so it's not just a fiction of the law, but something that really relates to what is the case. All of this has the effect of nullifying and excluding all boasting in status and privilege, most particularly the idea that Israel has a peculiar status that sets it above all of the rest of humanity, that makes it somehow special and unique and immune from God's judgment. By what kind of law or Torah is this sustained? By the Torah of works, the Torah that set Israel apart from the nations by its performance of rights such as circumcision? No, rather it is by the so-called Torah of faith, as people have good standing with God on the basis of a promise and free gift received by faith, something that has been testified to and witnessed to by the Torah, rather than on the basis of obedient performance of legal rituals that set Jews over against Gentiles.

God is the one creator God of all humanity, not only one part of it, the Jews, and every human being that enjoys good standing with God enjoys that good standing on the basis of faith and its receipt of God's free gift. The righteous circumcised, who are within the covenant, stand in their good standing before God by faith. The righteous uncircumcised, who have no covenant standing before God as Gentiles, enter into such a righteous standing through faith.

As we move forward in Paul's argument, we will see that the law itself is not jettisoned. Indeed, we can see the law arriving at its intended destination through faith. The law is upheld, not overthrown by faith.

A question to consider, reading the book of Romans to this point as a story of the revelation of God's justice, what are some of the details that assume a greater prominence or salience?