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August 2nd: 1 Samuel 22 & Romans 3

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Saul executes the ban against the priests. 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

1 Samuel chapter 22. David departed from there and escaped to the cave of the Dolom. And when his brothers and all his father's house heard it, they went down there to him.

And everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter in soul, gathered to him. And he became commander over them. And there were with him about four hundred men.

And David went from there to Mizpah of Moab. And he said to the king of Moab, please let my father and my mother stay with you till I know what God will do for me. And he left them with the king of Moab, and they stayed with him all the time that David was in the stronghold.

Then the prophet Gad said to David, Do not remain in the stronghold, depart and go into

the land of Judah. So David departed and went into the forest of Hereth. Now Saul heard that David was discovered, and the men who were with him.

Saul was sitting at Gibeah under the tamarisk tree on the height with his spear in his hand, and all his servants were standing about him. And Saul said to his servants who stood about him, Hear now, people of Benjamin, will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and vineyards? Will he make you all commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds, that all of you have conspired against me? No one discloses to me when my son makes a covenant with the son of Jesse. None of you are sorry for me or discloses to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me to lie in wait as at this day.

Then answered Doeg the Edomite, who stood by the servants of Saul, I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahithub, and he inquired of the Lord for him, and gave him provisions, and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine. Then the king sent to summon Ahimelech the priest, the son of Ahithub, and all his father's house, the priests who were at Nob, and all of them came to the king. And Saul said, Hear now, son of Ahithub.

And he answered, Here I am, my lord. And Saul said to him, Why have you conspired against me, you and the son of Jesse, in that you have given him bread and a sword, and have inquired of God for him, so that he has risen against me to lie in wait as at this day? Then Ahimelech answered the king, And who among all your servants is so faithful as David, who is the king's son-in-law and captain over your bodyguard, and honoured in your house? Is today the first time that I have inquired of God for him? No, let not the king impute anything to his servant, or to all the house of my father, for your servant has known nothing of all this, much or little. And the king said, You shall surely die, Ahimelech, you and all your father's house.

And the king said to the guard who stood about him, Turn and kill the priests of the lord, because their hand also is with David, and they knew that he fled, and did not disclose it to me. But the servants of the king would not put out their hand to strike the priests of the lord. Then the king said to Doeg, You turn and strike the priests.

And Doeg the Edomite turned and struck down the priests, and he killed on that day eighty-five persons who wore the linen ephod. And Nob, the city of the priests, he put to the sword, both man and woman, child and infant, ox, donkey and sheep he put to the sword. But one of the sons of Ahimelech, the son of Ahitab, named Abiathar, escaped and fled after David.

And Abiathar told David that Saul had killed the priests of the lord, and David said to Abiathar, I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul, I have occasioned the death of all the persons of your father's house. Stay with me, do not be afraid, for he who seeks my life seeks your life. With me you shall be in

safekeeping.

David begins 1 Samuel chapter 22 by departing from Gath and King Achish. It was not a safe place for him to remain, given his history with the Philistines. He escapes to the cave of Vidalum, where he spends some time.

His brothers and his family join him there, knowing that their lives would be in danger on account of their association with him. A great many others also rally to him, people who were in distress, people who were in debt, and people who were bitter and disaffected in various ways. This is reminiscent of Jephthah in Judges chapter 11 verses 1 to 3. Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of a prostitute.

Gilead was the father of Jephthah. And Gilead's wife also bore him sons. And when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman.

Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob. And worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him. David, like Jephthah, is surrounded by disaffected persons, and this is a very dangerous position to be in.

No doubt many of these men would be spoiling for a revolution. David isn't an outright rebellion against Saul. However, he is with outlaws and will function as a sort of regional warlord in some ways.

He is surrounded by 400 men. James Jordan suggests that this represents people from the four corners of the land coming to David. It should be observed that this is a relatively substantial force.

Saul himself only had 600 men with him back in chapter 13 verse 15, when he had the standoff against the Philistines at the Pass of Micmash. We might also think of the 400 men that were with Esau in Genesis chapter 32 and 33. Later, David's association with 400 men will be in a decisively Esau-like action.

And so the presence of 400 men around David here should probably make us think back to the story of Esau and Jacob. This is another way in which David has some Esau characteristics. David is described as ruddy in chapter 16 and 17, the only other character apart from Esau in scripture to be described in that way.

Such associations with Esau are not proof that David is a bad guy, but they do represent some ambivalent characteristics, some characteristics of David that can go either direction, that can be very good under certain circumstances, or might be turned to evil. David goes up then to Moab. He brings his father and mother to the king of Moab and puts them in his care.

The fact that David is dealing with other kings at this point of the region is once again a

sign that he is assuming something of a royal status. He was described as the king of the land by the Philistines in the previous chapter, and now he's dealing with the king of Moab. We should recall that Jesse's grandmother was a Moabite, so perhaps there is some enduring connection between David's family and the Moabites, a connection established through Ruth.

David is instructed by the prophet Gad to go to Judah. David has a prophet of the Lord in his party, as Peter Lighthouse observes. This is David again starting to act like a king, with a prophet as a royal advisor.

Judah becomes David's base. Judah is David's tribal region, where he would have the greatest base of loyalty. At times like this, the fault lines in Israel start to present themselves.

We've seen some of these before, the northern tribes led by the house of Joseph, and the southern tribes led by the houses of Benjamin and later Judah, the Transjordanian tribes, and the tribes in the land. If the Israelite project is to fail, one has a pretty good sense of the fracture lines upon which it would fall apart. Saul is now described sitting under the Tamarisk tree.

Trees are often associated with rule, and he has his spear in his hand. Such a recurring detail of characterization is not incidental or unimportant. Saul's relationship to his spear associates him with Goliath, but it also illustrates his paranoid relationship with power.

He grips tightly onto his spear and can't let it go. Saul is surrounded by his servants, and he speaks to them as people of Benjamin. Saul's court clearly isn't a place of equal opportunity for Israelites.

Rather, it is filled with his relatives and fellow Benjaminites. This is fairly typical of monarchies and governments in very tribal societies. The king is seldom merely an individual impartially ruling the whole people, but he represents a royal house and a tribe that is particularly enriched by his reign.

His family, friends, relatives and tribespeople will receive cushy sinecures and be privileged in many ways. Saul appeals to this base self-interest of those surrounding him, making clear that they have been greatly advantaged by his favoritism and nepotism, but they wouldn't enjoy such privileges under a Davidic monarchy. Saul's question to his followers, Hear now, people of Benjamin, will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and vineyards? Will he make you all commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds? You should recall one of Samuel's warnings concerning the king in chapter 8, verses 14 to 15.

He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his

officers and to his servants. Once again, 1 Samuel is revealing dynamics of the operations of power, that we should all recognize, how government can so often rest upon cynical self-interest over the concerns of justice.

One can also well imagine how such a dynamic among rulers would excite grievances in the wider population, who saw their property heavily taxed or taken in order to enrich Benjaminites. Saul is paranoid and he's self-pitying. He thinks that everyone is conspiring against him, everyone is out to get him.

Rather than exercising charisma and natural authority, he sullenly berates those around him, wondering aloud why no one feels sorry for him. His lack of a healthy form of authority means that he has to appeal to his servants' lower self-serving instincts. It also relates to his mistrustful and paranoid tendencies, which means that he depends very heavily upon people of his own tribe, whose self-serving interests most naturally align with his own.

We should also notice the ways that Saul has increasingly become fixated on the kingdom as his personal power. His speech to the Benjaminites reveals just how narrowly self-focused Saul has become. Leaders may be subject to all sorts of unreasonable treatment, but leaders who are so self-focused, self-pitying, and take everything personally are very dangerous.

Saul has lost sight of the bigger picture. He now sees the nation as there to serve him, rather than of himself as a minister of God to the nation. We should again remember the significance of the shifting pronouns in Samuel's warning about the king.

The people want a king to fight their battles, but they fail to appreciate that they would end up fighting his personal battles, being the servants of the bloated ego of the king. The servants of Saul seem to have failed him, they've not informed him about the situation. However, there is one who assists him, Doeg the Edomite.

The fact that Saul is assisted by an Edomite perhaps highlights the fact that Saul is taking on the character of the original Edom, Esau, who sought to kill his brother Jacob. As we read on in the story, David's Jacob character will become quite pronounced. However, David is also, as we have already seen in this chapter, someone with subtle associations with Esau.

Ahimelech, when challenged about the assistance that he gave to David, rightly defended David as a faithful and loyal servant of the king. Ahimelech speaks of David in a way that brings to light some of the irrationality of Saul's hatred of him. David is not someone who has sought to rebel against Saul.

He is Saul's own son-in-law and loyal servant. He is honoured among Saul's servants for his exceptional service. Saul himself has raised him up to high office.

It is Saul's fear, paranoia, envy and anger that has made David appear to be his enemy. Yet even now, David is still not returning the animosity. Ahimelech has been given a misleading story by David so that he might have plausible deniability.

Ahimelech could justifiably have protested that he believed that David was on a mission from Saul, as David had told him. However, this did not protect him. Saul commands his servants to strike down the priests.

And once again, the servants of Saul don't fulfil his command, don't come to his side. Yet, once again, Doeg the Edomite does. Doeg, presumably with his band of men, not unlikely a group of Edomites themselves, killed the priests.

And not just the priests, but all of their families and animals. As James Jordan remarks, he is enacting the ban upon the priests, the utter judgement that applied to the Canaanites. Saul, who was judged for his failure to perform the ban upon the Amalekites, now performs the ban upon the servants of the Lord.

This is a sort of exact inversion of the holy warfare of the conquest. And the fact that Saul enacts this on the basis of mere suspicion of disloyalty to himself, reveals the idolatrous character that his kingdom has assumed. He is claiming the people for himself, rather than acting as their guardian for the sake of the Lord.

As Jordan observes again, on a number of occasions the Edomites or the Amalekites are the ones who prey upon the Israelites when they are at their weakest. The Edomites are the scavengers that accompany the Babylonians when they destroy Jerusalem. They are condemned for this in Psalm 137 and in the prophecy of Obadiah.

The Idumeans, another name for the Edomites, do a similar thing when the Romans destroy Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70. They massacre the priests when the zealots let them into the city. Saul failed to judge the Amalekites, descendants of Edom, and now the Edomites slaughters the servants of the Lord.

Saul is not just fighting against David here, but he has taken up arms against the Lord himself. In Doeg, he has also chosen the sort of servant that he wants around him. Saul has lost the ability to rule by godly authority.

His servants no longer obey his commands on the basis of their natural justice, or on the basis of his appropriate command. Rather, he needs to initiate a reign of terror, enacting the ban upon his enemies because he can't reign by other means. He is a man of fear and can only rule by fear.

When Abiathar flees to David, David recognizes that he inadvertently brought death upon Abiathar's household. This massacre of the priests, we should consider, is a fulfillment in part of the judgment upon Eli and his household in chapter 2, verses 30-33. Therefore the Lord, the God of Israel, declares, I promised that your house and the house

of your father should go in and out before me forever.

But now the Lord declares, far be it from me. For those who honor me, I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed. Behold, the days are coming when I will cut off your strength and the strength of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your house.

Then in distress you will look with envious eye on all the prosperity that shall be bestowed on Israel, and there shall not be an old man in your house forever. The only one of you whom I shall not cut off from my altar shall be spared to weep his eyes out, to grieve his heart, and all the descendants of your house shall die by the sword of men. Abiathar himself will be cut off from the altar in chapter 2 of 1 Kings.

However, although this is a fulfillment of God's judgment upon Eli, Saul has also driven the priesthood into the hands of David. It is David in this chapter who is consulting a prophet, who is accompanied by a priest, who is a magnet for followers, who is dealing with the surrounding kings. Saul is hemorrhaging support.

He is unable to command the obedience of his servants. He is driven to a reign of terror, and he cuts himself off from priest and prophet, initiating a holy war against the Lord. In 2 Samuel chapter 21, we discover that Saul has struck down the Gibeonites.

As the Gibeonites were servants of the house of God, chopping wood and carrying water, Lighthouse suggests that it is likely that that happened at this point too. A question to consider. The main characters in this chapter, David, Saul, and Doeg, all have subtle or not so subtle associations with Esau.

How might these associations highlight features of the contradictory character of Esau, and help us to think more deeply about the comparisons and contrasts between the characters in Esau, and between each of them and the others? Romans chapter 3 By no means! As some people slanderously charge us with saying, their condemnation is just. 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 turned 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 characterisation 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 context from which he is drawing. We need to beware of abstracting his quotations from their original context, 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. The fool says in his heart, there is no God. They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds.

There is none who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside.

Together they have become corrupt. There is none who does good. Not even one.

But verses 4-5 that come after it read as follows. 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 characterisation of humanity that begins the psalm that Paul quotes.

The human race more generally is characterised 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 chapter 8 verse 21, the Lord repeats the characterisation 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 judgement 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 judgement 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 judgement upon sin, the law itself brings sin to light and condemns it.

It's a means of the very judgement 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, Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked. 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, an 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 puts 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?