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February 25th: Lamentations 1 & Romans 9

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The lonely city. The election of grace and God's formation of his people.

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

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Transcript

Lamentations, chapter 1. How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces, has become a slave. She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks, among all her lovers. She has none to comfort her.

All her friends have dealt treacherously with her. They have become her enemies. Judah has gone into exile because of affliction and hard servitude.

She dwells now among the nations, but finds no resting place. Her pursuers have all overtaken her, in the midst of her distress. The roads to Zion mourn, for none come to the festival.

All her gates are desolate. Her priests groan. Her virgins have been afflicted, and she herself suffers bitterly.

Her foes have become the head, her enemies pride. She cannot prosper, because the Lord has afflicted her, for the multitude of her transgressions. Her children have gone away, captives before the foe.

From the daughter of Zion, all her majesty has departed. Her princes have become like deer, that find no pasture. They fled without strength before the pursuer.

Jerusalem remembers, in the days of her affliction and wandering, all the precious things that were hers from days of old, when her people fell into the hand of the foe, and there was none to help her. Her foes gloated over her. They mocked at her downfall.

Jerusalem sinned grievously. Therefore she became filthy. All who honoured her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness.

She herself groans, and turns her face away. Her uncleanness was in her skirts. She took no thought of her future.

Therefore her fall is terrible. She has no comforter. O Lord, behold my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed.

The enemy has stretched out his hands over all her precious things, for she has seen the nations enter her sanctuary, those whom you forbade to enter your congregation. All her people groan, as they search for bread. They trade their treasures for food, to revive their strength.

Look, O Lord, and see, for I am despised. Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see. If there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger.

From on high he sent fire, into my bones he made it descend. He spread a net for my feet. He turned me back.

He has left me stunned, faint all the day long. My transgressions were bound into a yoke. By his hand they were fastened together.

They were set upon my neck. He caused my strength to fail. The Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot withstand.

The Lord rejected all my mighty men in my midst. He summoned an assembly against me, to crush my young men. The Lord has trodden, as in a winepress, the virgin daughter of Judah.

For these things I weep. My eyes flow with tears. For a Comforter is far from me, one to revive my spirit.

My children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed. Zion stretches out her hands, but

there is none to comfort her. The Lord has commanded against Jacob, that his neighbors should be his foes.

Jerusalem has become a filthy thing among them. The Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word. But hear, all you peoples, and see my suffering.

My young women and my young men have gone into captivity. I call to my lovers, but they deceive me. My priests and elders perished in the city, while they sought food to revive their strength.

Look, O Lord, for I am in distress. My stomach churns, my heart is wrung within me, because I have been very rebellious. In the street the sword bereaves, in the house it is like death.

They heard my groaning, yet there is no one to comfort me. All my enemies have heard of my trouble. They are glad that you have done it.

You have brought the day you announced. Now let them be as I am. Let all their evil doing come before you, and deal with them as you have dealt with me, because of all my transgressions.

For my groans are many, and my heart is faint. The Book of Lamentations, as its name makes clear, is a series of laments. What do you say after the world has collapsed, after the city of Jerusalem has been destroyed by its enemies, as the whole theological framework of a regime is thrown into uncertainty? The Book of Lamentations explores the impact, both theological and psychological, of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.

The Book of Lamentations is written in a mixed poetic form, with various genres interwoven. We see elements of the dirge, for instance, the first line being one example of this, communal complaint, prayer, and other forms all bound together. Most notably, most of the Book of Lamentations is written in an acrostic form, but with some variations.

Chapter 1 follows a different alphabetical order than chapters 2 to 4, with the orders of the Hebrew letters Peh and Ein reversed. Tighter acrostic structure can be seen in chapter 3, in which each line, and not just the first line in the verse, begins with the appropriate letter of the alphabet. There are other variations, for instance, there are four lines instead of the typical three in verse 7 of chapter 1 and in verse 19 of chapter 2. There are other examples of acrostic poetry in scripture.

Psalm 119 is perhaps the most famous, but other forms of acrostic poetry can be found elsewhere in the Psalms. In places like Psalms 111 and 112, the literary form invites the juxtaposition of statements between two successive Psalms. Johann Renkema makes the argument that there are connections to be observed across the acrostic poems of

Lamentations as well.

A further famous example of acrostic poetry in scripture is found in Proverbs chapter 31, the concluding passage of the book that concerns the virtuous woman. Such a form might have been chosen as an aid to memory. It's also a way of conveying a sense of completeness.

The acrostic poetry of Lamentations covers the sorrows of Jerusalem from A to Z. Within the poetry of Lamentations, lines usually have two unequal segments, with the first one word longer than the second. William Shay has gone to the point of arguing that the 3-2 structure of the poetic lines structures the book as a whole on a chapter level. If this is the case, it might help to explain why chapter 5, although having 22 verses, as we would expect from an acrostic poem in Hebrew, is not actually ordered alphabetically.

If Shay is right, and his argument is a promising one, then it goes beyond merely supporting the unity of the book to suggesting that this unity is a highly structured and purposive one which will reward close attention. The genre of the city lament, as we see in Lamentations, is not exclusive to scripture in the ancient Near East. There are other instances of such poetry across a vast period of time.

Within the Hebrew canon, this book is part of the writings, and more specifically one of the five scrolls along with Song of Songs, Ruth, Ecclesiastes and Esther, all books that are associated with particular feasts or fasts. Lamentations, unsurprisingly, is associated with Tisha B'Av, a fast commemorating various calamities to befall the Jewish nation, from the people's failure to enter into the Promised Land onwards. Despite its position in the Hebrew canon, authorship has traditionally been attributed to Jeremiah, but this is by no means certain, nor does scripture demand such an attribution.

There are various arguments in favour. First of all, Jeremiah is associated with laments. In 2 Chronicles 35, Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Jeziel.

There is also similar material to this in the Book of Jeremiah. We might think here of Jeremiah's complaints or confessions. Jeremiah was also on the scene after the destruction of Jerusalem, so he would have been well situated to write such a book.

His theology is similar to that of the Book of Lamentations. He uses similar figures of speech, and as SR Driver notes, there are several examples of shared phrases. There are, however, arguments that push in the other direction.

There is unique vocabulary in the Book of Lamentations that is not found in the entirety of the Book of Jeremiah. The acrostic style is not something that Jeremiah uses elsewhere. Indeed, some have doubted that Lamentations itself is the work of a single author.

Chapters 3 and 5, in particular, have features that might set them apart from the other

chapters. Others have argued that Lamentations draws at certain points upon the Book of Ezekiel, which, as it postdates Jeremiah's presumed death, would rule out Jeremiah's authorship. However, it's possible that even if Ezekiel was an influence, that that influence came prior to the completion of the Book of Ezekiel, as we have it in the canon.

Furthermore, if we look in the Book of Jeremiah, we find several examples of funeral laments, such as those in the Book of Lamentations. Wherever we come down on these questions, no claim of Scripture itself is at stake here. Nevertheless, it's not unreasonable to believe that Jeremiah himself was the author, or even someone close to Jeremiah.

Perhaps, at the least, we would expect that someone like Jeremiah was the author. The first half of chapter 1 gives a more third-person account of Jerusalem's desolation, which switches to a first-person account from Jerusalem herself in the second half. A common theme throughout is Jerusalem's lack of comfort.

Wherever she looks, there is no one to comfort her. There's also the frequent appearance of the term all with reference to various things, representing the utterness and totality of Jerusalem's devastation. The first verses express the series of reversals that Jerusalem has experienced.

She was once full of people, and now sits lonely. While she was once great among the nations round about, she is now like a widow, bereft and abandoned. She was once like a princess, but has now become a slave.

She has been abandoned by all of the people that she once looked to and trusted in, her friends and her lovers. Her lovers here are probably the surrounding nations after whose gods she went, and with whom she tried to form political alliances. We find similar expressions in places like Jeremiah chapter 22, verses 20-22.

Go up to Lebanon, and cry out, and lift up your voice in Bashan. Cry out from Abarim, for all your lovers are destroyed. I spoke to you in your prosperity, but you said, I will not listen.

This has been your way from your youth, that you have not obeyed my voice. The wind shall shepherd all your shepherds, and your lovers shall go into captivity. Then you will be ashamed and confounded because of all your evil.

Judah has been sent away into affliction and hard servitude in exile, and she is now scattered among the nations, dispersed among the peoples. Her attempts to escape were futile. We might here recall Zedekiah's short-lived attempt to escape from the Babylonians as the city fell to them.

From the reversal suffered by Jerusalem in the first few verses, we move to the lack of life and the bereftness of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was a site of pilgrimage, especially during

the three pilgrimage feasts. Yet roads that would once have been full of people coming to the feast, and gates through which pilgrims would once have thronged, are now silent and empty.

In the Curses and the Blessings of the Covenant in Deuteronomy chapter 28, one of the blessings of obedience was that Israel would become the head, and one of the curses was that their enemies would become the head, and that they would be the tail. Here Zion mourns that her enemies have become the head over her. She has been bereft of her children.

They have been taken away as captives. Her majesty has departed, perhaps most notably the temple and the presence of the Lord within it, but also the sovereignty that Jerusalem used to enjoy, and the great and grand buildings, and the royal splendor, and the pomp that would have expressed it. All of this has been stripped from her.

Jerusalem had to go on the run from her pursuers, but yet was easily overtaken as she lacked the strength. Jerusalem is painfully afflicted by the memories of the things that she once enjoyed. The Lord had blessed and enriched Jerusalem in so many ways, and yet she had defied him and disregarded his word.

Here the narrator talks about Jerusalem's defilement. On account of Jerusalem's sin, she had become unclean. The metaphor of nakedness here is used.

Nakedness is associated with shame. It's also expressive of vulnerability, of stripping of finery, and also of disclosing the true character of something. All of these things have befallen Zion, and as a result she is despised by everyone.

Her uncleanness and her sin clings to her. It's in her skirts. Similar language is found in Jeremiah chapter 2 verse 34.

Also on your skirts is found the lifeblood of the guiltless poor. You did not find them breaking in. As she is despised by her neighbors and people who once sought her out, she looks for help.

There is no comforter. There is no one to come to her aid. She calls out to the Lord, yet he has turned his back upon her.

In her desolate condition, Jerusalem is struggling to survive. The enemy has taken those things that were once precious to her, the treasures of the city, but also her children. The Gentile enemies of Jerusalem entered into the sanctuary itself and defiled it.

According to Deuteronomy chapter 23, they were forbidden from entering, but yet they had done so nonetheless. In addition to the violation of the temple, Jerusalem experiences the shame and the indignity of falling to such a low status. The family treasures are being pawned, and the children are being sold into slavery, merely to give

her the bread that she needs to eat.

Hers is a most pitiable condition. In verse 12, her own voice enters, expressing her devastation and her profound distress. Her distress, she contends, is greater than that of any other, and in the second half of the chapter, it is clearly expressed that it is the Lord that has brought this upon her.

Her condition is the result of the Lord's fierce anger. She describes the Lord sending fire into her bones, a metaphor that Jeremiah uses in his prophecy in chapter 20 verse 9. The Lord acts like someone trying to trap or snare her. He has turned into her enemy.

Jeremiah talked about the yoke of the king of Babylon that would be placed upon Judah. Here, Jerusalem speaks of a yoke of her own sins that were formed by the Lord. The Lord formed this yoke and placed it upon her, making her subject to a nation far greater than she could withstand.

The Lord is the architect of Jerusalem's downfall. Jerusalem describes her destruction as like the Lord summoning a great festival within her, but a festival in which her enemies would destroy her, the Lord himself trampling Jerusalem like a winepress. The narrator describes the situation of Zion once again in verse 17, before we hear the voice of Jerusalem entering in again.

Jerusalem's pathetic and poignant situation is described in terms of a lack of comforters again, and the fact that the Lord, the one to whom she should have looked, has commanded this against her. In Psalm 51 verse 4, the psalmist confesses, Lamentations chapter 1 concludes with a similar confession. At the end of the prophecy of Jeremiah, Jeremiah speaks of the judgment upon the nations.

The Lord will judge his people, but he will also judge the other nations. Here Jerusalem expresses her desire that the Lord would judge these other peoples, those who have marked her fate, those who rather than learning from her fate and repenting in fear, have boasted over her in their pride. The Lord, in establishing his righteousness and expressing his compassion for his people, will bring down those nations too.

A question to consider, why is lament so rare within the life of the contemporary church? Romans chapter 9 The promise according to the flesh is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. But it is not as though the word of God has failed.

For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring. But through Isaac shall your offspring be named. This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.

For this is what the promise said, About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son. And not only so, but also when Rebecca had conceived children by one man,

our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born, and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works, but because of him who calls, she was told, the older will serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means. For he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy.

For the scripture says to Pharaoh, For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. You will say to me then, Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will? But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is moulded say to its moulder, Why have you made me like this? Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honourable use, and another for dishonourable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath, and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only, but also from the Gentiles? As indeed he says in Hosea, Those who are not my people I will call my people, and her who was not beloved I will call beloved.

And in the very place where it was said to them, You are not my people, there they will be called sons of the living God. And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay. And as Isaiah predicted, If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah.

What shall we say then, that Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is a righteousness that is by faith, but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law? Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone. As it is written, Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.

Many people have read Romans chapter 9 and following as a sort of appendix to the main body of Romans. Romans 1-8 are about the way of salvation, then in Romans 9 Paul teaches about the doctrine of election and then gets into the question of the status of Israel. While popular in some quarters, this is quite a mistaken understanding of Romans.

If we have been paying attention, it will be clear that the issues addressed in Romans chapter 9-11 are absolutely integral to the letter. In fact, a reasonable case could be made that these are the most important chapters for Paul's argument in the epistle. Here it is important to remember that the epistle is in many ways more focused upon God's problem and God's solution to that than upon man's problem and God's solution to that.

What do we mean by this? God has to be both just and the justifier. He has to deal appropriately with sin and maintain moral order in his universe. However, he also desires to deliver human beings from sin and put them in right standing with himself.

He needs to keep the promises that he has made to Israel. At the heart of the book of Romans is not an account of how individuals can get right with a holy God, although Romans clearly addresses those problems. Rather, Romans is about how, in the fullness of time in history, God revealed his saving justice by which sinful people can be put in good standing with him.

How that good standing is not a mere fiction, but is according to truth, being in keeping with judgment according to works on the last day. It is about how this new people in Christ fulfils the great purpose that God had from the beginning and will involve the renewal of all creation. However, there is one great big glaring problem, and that's Israel.

Israel has, for the most part, not responded positively to the Gospel. Indeed, they have generally rejected Christ. Yet Israel receives so many blessings and promises from God, it seems as if God has failed in their case.

And if that is the case, everything else is thrown into question. If Messiah Jesus is the fulfilment of the promises made to Israel, then how are we to explain this? This is a profoundly personal matter for Paul too. He is in very great distress about the state of Israel.

They're his own compatriots. He even goes to the extent of, like Moses in the book of Exodus, expressing the desire that he be cut off in order that they might be saved. He enumerates all of the blessings of Israel, ending with the greatest of all.

From Israel, according to the flesh, came the Messiah, Jesus. There is also likely an exceptionally remarkable statement here concerning Jesus. Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever.

If this is the right way of understanding Paul's statement, and there is debate on this point, it is a direct statement of the deity of the Messiah, Jesus. However, it occurs in a context that heightens the irony. God himself took Israelite flesh, and yet Israel have failed to receive him.

In response to this, Paul retells the story of Israel, in order that we can understand what is happening at this juncture in history. Though many have missed the fact, most of Paul's thought is about exploring the meaning of history, how to articulate the events of history in a meaningful narrative that gives us the means by which to move forward in an appropriate manner. At this juncture of history, following the Christ event, how do we understand that Israel has largely rejected the Gospel, whereas the Gentiles have accepted it in large numbers? How do we account for this against the background of God's covenant purpose and promise for his people of Israel? This would seem to be incongruous with God's intent to save his people.

It would seem to go against the purpose of the covenant. In response to this, then, Paul tells the story in a way that highlights, for instance, that the Gentiles who had not been seeking God are nonetheless fitting recipients of God's mercy. That this is in keeping with how Israel always was constituted, by an act of pure grace, not on the basis of anything that might mark them out as deserving recipients.

Now this is not just a matter of works, it could be a matter of ancestry, or it could be a matter of some other factor, some standing or worth that people could claim before God. Paul is reading the story of Genesis at this point, and then he moves on to the story of Exodus and elsewhere, but he retells the story in a way that shows that Israel was never established on the basis of its works or its worth, of its keeping of the law, or of its being marked out as the people of the law. What he is talking about here is not primarily earning salvation through merit, although that is an implication of it.

Rather, he is challenging anything that might mark anyone out as a fitting recipient of God's grace. For instance, whether it is birth, or being born to a particular father. Isaac was the one through whom God would call Abraham's seed, not Ishmael, so it is not about birth.

Mere descent from Abraham or Israel was never the fundamental basis of Israel's identity as a people. Well, what about the fact of works, and the way that you are an observant keeper of the law? Well, we can see the story of Jacob and Esau. Why did God choose Jacob over Esau? God says, Jacob I have loved, Esau I have hated.

Yet this occurs even within the womb itself, before any actions have been performed. God chose Jacob over Esau, and said that the older should serve the younger. At each point in Israel's history, Israel was constituted on the basis of grace, and of divine election, of a divine election that was not conditioned upon anything that was done by the human actors.

Now, as we read through the story of Genesis, we should recognise this. This is what we see in the story itself. Why did God choose Isaac rather than Ishmael? Not on the basis of anything that either of them did.

Rather, it was divine purpose, it was divine election. It was not based on the choice or the actions of the participants involved. It was God.

Why was Jacob chosen over Esau? Not because Jacob did anything that earned that, because the choice happened before either of them was born. Nor was it on the basis of the natural status enjoyed by the older, because Jacob was chosen rather than Esau. Later on, we will see that choice reaffirmed, and it is something that is manifest also in Esau's despising of the covenant, and those sorts of things.

But that is not the basis for it. It is not that God saw Esau's wickedness and then decided to cut him off from the covenant. Rather, God's purpose all along was that Jacob should be the one through whom the covenant line would be established.

And so the very origins of Israel were established by an unconditioned series of actions of divine grace. This is the way that God forms his people. And we should notice the asymmetries as we go through this.

This is about God's positive action of grace. It is not that there is a symmetrical action of grace and a sort of anti-grace of violent rejection and reprobation. This is not a double decree in the way that would make one decree symmetrical with the other.

And the other thing to notice here is that this is not about salvation primarily. This is about God's covenant purpose of forming his people. In the New Covenant, we see that it is far more about salvation, because it is the means by which God is blessing and bringing in all peoples, whereas in the past this was restricted to Israel.

You did not have to be a member of Israel though to be saved. There is no reason to believe that Ishmael was damned on account of his not being chosen, for instance. Indeed, there are reasons why we might think that he was indeed saved.

The issue here though is who is going to bear the covenant destiny and promise? Who will hold the covenant baton as it is passed down through history? And God always formed his people through an act of unconditioned grace. As we read through the story, it continues. So it goes beyond Esau and Jacob and into the story of the Exodus.

He says to Moses, I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion. So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. Notice again that there is an asymmetry here.

It talks about God's choice of mercy, his exercising of mercy and compassion. It does not speak about God choosing to exercise a violent rejection of people. The word for hated in the story of Esau need not bear the weight of violent rejection and animosity.

Although that element may appear later on as the story develops, it just means that God

chose or preferred Jacob over Esau, in the sense that he chose him rather than Esau. We see a similar thing in the story of Rachel and Leah. Leah is hated and Rachel is loved.

This does not mean that Leah is violently and viscerally disliked. It might involve a dislike, but that is not primarily what the words mean in that context. The point here, then, is that God is acting through the unconditioned act of mercy upon people who are unworthy of it.

God's action in grace is always to unworthy recipients. There is no need for God to justify himself in this way. God is not in the position of having to justify himself.

He is exercising pure grace, unconditioned grace, undeserved favour towards people, none of whom are worthy recipients, and all of whom are formed as a people purely out of God's goodness and undeserved favour. Remember, this is the formation of a people, not just the choice of detached individuals. Paul's point here is to discuss the way that God forms his people in history, so that the Romans can better understand why the Gentiles can be brought in, in a way that is in keeping with the way that God always works, and then also how Israel's stumbling can be made to fit in to the larger story of how God works in history.

Abraham, Esau, Jacob, Isaac, Ishmael - these are not just odd individuals who happen to be believers or unbelievers. No, they are the people through whom God was shaping, at its very origins, his people. The choice of Isaac over Ishmael was not just the choice of an individual, it was the choice of a people.

It was the choice of the descendants of Isaac, rather than those of Ishmael. In the same way with Esau and Jacob, it is not that God was choosing this one individual over another individual primarily. It was God determining how he was going to form his people over history.

What sort of people was he going to create? It's the moulding of a people. Notice also that election, as it is described in this chapter, is something that happens in history. The choice of Jacob was declared while he was in the womb.

It's not the same thing as an election in eternity past. God's sovereignty is exercised in history, throughout Israel's history. And this is a point that Paul supports by retelling the story also of the Exodus.

In the story of the Exodus, the truth of God's sovereignty is addressed to Pharaoh. Within the story of the Exodus, then, God raises Pharaoh up. This is not the same thing as God making Pharaoh sinful.

For instance, in the story of Job, Job is attacked by people around him and all his people are killed and we have other disasters that befall him. It is not, however, as if the people around him were very favourably inclined to Job and that Job was in this situation where

all his neighbours were praying for him and wishing him well and seeking his good and then suddenly they just randomly turned on him. No, it says that God had created a hedge around him, protecting him.

In the same way, when we think about someone being raised up or hardened, when we look at the story of the Exodus, we see that on the one hand God hardens and on the other hand Pharaoh hardened himself. It's a fitting way to see things. It recognises the integrity of secondary causation, that God's causation is not in competition with human causation.

And particularly when it comes to sin, God is not the author of sin. When we read the story of Pharaoh, Pharaoh hardens himself. But as he hardens himself, God is hardening him as well.

Indeed, on many of the occasions when it talks about hardening, it's rather God giving him the power and strength of will so that he can take his stand. God's sovereign direction of Pharaoh's heart and Pharaoh's hardening of his own heart are not in competition with each other. Pharaoh is raised up in order to show God's glory, that God in the act of the Exodus might demonstrate his power over the false gods and rulers of the Egyptians and deliver his people from the house of bondage.

And to do that he gives, as it were, free reign to the sin in Pharaoh's life. Indeed, he empowers Pharaoh's will in order that Pharaoh can stand even more surely in his rebellion. He allows him to rise to a fuller stature in order that he might be broken down.

Paul writes, And Paul responds to this with the idea or the illustration of the potter and the clay, something that we find in the Old Testament. The potter and the clay is an important image to attend to. It is not that God creates a blank slate and then writes on it whatever he wills.

The potter-clay image is an image of movement between the potter and the clay. God is shaping real entities in history, real people and real people groups. So, whether he is shaping Pharaoh as a part of the Exodus, whether he is shaping his people through the choice of Isaac and the choice of Jacob over Esau, this is God forming his pottery, as it were, forming his people over history.

And as he forms that people, it is being made into a vessel for his glory. And on the other hand, we have vessels of honor and vessels for dishonor. Paul raises a hypothetical question at this point.

What is Paul saying here? He is returning to the situation at this moment in time and raising a hypothetical question. What if God, as in the situation of the Exodus, with the design of saving and delivering his people, is allowing the vessels of wrath to exist and, enduring with much longsuffering, the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, that he

might make known the riches of his glory to the vessels of mercy? We should recognize a number of things about this. First of all, enduring the vessels of wrath is for the sake of the salvation of the vessels of mercy.

It is for the sake of grace that God endures with the vessels of wrath. Likewise, God is not seen as preparing those to the same degree as the others. Those vessels of wrath are hardened, and they are hardened not necessarily through pure divine action upon them.

They can be hardened through their own work as well. As we read this, we should read it recognizing that the background is unbelieving Israel and their rejection of and resistance to the gospel. What is the purpose of that? Paul is raising the hypothetical possibility that this is perhaps happening in order that God might demonstrate his power.

They are being fitted for destruction, a destruction that ultimately comes in A.D. 70, as Israel is judged and Jerusalem and its temple are destroyed in God's judgment. That event is the means by which God makes his power known. These vessels of wrath fitted for destruction are not necessarily about vessels of wrath from all eternity fitted for wrath in hell.

Again, it is a historical account. It is about God fitting particular people for destruction within history for a historical judgment. Israel has rejected Christ.

They rejected Christ in his initial mission. And now they have not just rejected the Son of Man, but have rejected the spirit given at Pentecost that bears witness to the risen Christ. As a result, much of that particular generation will be destroyed.

However, God is currently bearing with them with long suffering in order that he might save his people at this moment in time. And that bearing with them with long suffering ultimately leads to bringing in many Jews and Gentiles. These are the people that God has called.

This new people is led by the spirit, the people that he has spoken about in chapter 8. And then again he looks back to the Old Testament story of Hosea. I will call them my people who are not my people, and her beloved who was not beloved. And it shall come to pass in the place where it was said to them, you are not my people, there they shall be called sons of the living God.

Isaiah also cries out concerning Israel, though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, the remnant will be saved. For he will finish the work and cut it short in righteousness, because the Lord will make a short work upon the earth. In these references to the Old Testament, Paul is once again showing that this is about the way that God has always done things.

The way that God called and established his people at the beginning is the way that he is doing things now in bringing Gentiles in, apart from natural status, works or ancestry. God called Abraham as if from nothing. God formed Isaac through bringing life to a dead womb and preparing Abraham to bear a seed.

None of this is on the basis of merit, on the basis of worth, on the basis of being a fitting recipient of God's mercy. One could imagine certain Israelites protesting, we have the temple, we practice circumcision, we keep the law, we are a people who are marked out by the covenant. We have all these covenant signs.

But in themselves, these do not make them fitting recipients of God's grace. We need to look back through the history of Israel to see at this present moment in time, all are under sin. God has formed his people from the very beginning through unconditioned acts of grace.

It is not based on birth, ancestry, status, standing or worth. Ishmael had Abraham as his father too, but he was not chosen. It is not on the basis of what you have done.

In the case of Esau, Esau was not the chosen one from his very birth, from even within the womb. It is not on the basis of being greater or lesser. Esau was the older, but he was still not chosen over the younger.

And as we look through the Old Testament, again and again we see this theme repeated. That God chooses, establishes, forms his people through the sovereign work of grace. It is not on the basis of anything that those people might do to merit their standing or their status.

And at this moment in time, just as we see in the prophecy of Hosea, God is calling a people who are not a people. Who had been, as it were, not just cut off, but never been a part of the people at all. And as he is calling them, they are, as it were, not just life from the dead, but life out of nothing.

The Gentiles called the people of God are a people formed where there was no people before. Now all of this raises deep questions. What about God's purposes expressed in his gracious choice of Abraham and his seed? We need not believe that Israel deserved its status to also ask questions like the following.

What about God's purpose and commitment expressed in that original act of choosing Abraham? Has God reneged on his purpose and his promise? Has he just abandoned his plan for Israel? Has he just thrown Israel to one side and decided to go on with the Gentiles? These are all questions that Paul is working with and he will continue with them in the next couple of chapters. Paul states the situation at the end of the chapter. The advent of Christ has led to two effects.

Gentiles who had not sought out righteousness, either understood in the sense of God

saving justice, setting the world to rights, or righteousness in the sense of good standing with God. Those Gentiles end up perceiving it. While Jews who pursued Torah observance, marking themselves out as special by the law, they believed that that would lead to them receiving God's saving justice or to enjoy good standing with him.

But they didn't even succeed in attaining the Torah itself. They pursued the law in the wrong way, by works of the law, rather than in the way of faith, by which true obedience is established. This is all the result of stumbling over a stumbling stone, a common theme in the New Testament.

The stumbling stone here is probably both Christ and the faith that corresponds to the receiving of God's grace in him. A question to consider. What are some places in the Old Testament which substantiate Paul's point in this chapter, that God's formation of Israel from the very beginning was apart from status, worth, standing, observance or ancestry?