



Study 5 Called to Serve

In this final study, we look at the way God becomes a servant in Jesus Christ and calls us to become servants also.

My Story

Several years ago, I studied a subject on caring for people with intellectual disabilities. This involved acting as a chaplain to a large residential institution on a weekly basis. I had previously had a good deal of contact with people with intellectual disabilities. I realise now that I somehow thought I was doing these people a favour by going along to help them out. Despite this, I vividly remember a feeling of shock when I first visited the institution. I was almost speechless with an overwhelming sense of the strangeness of the place and the people. For the first few visits I wandered around, hardly saying anything to anyone, feeling quite threatened by the people.

One day, I sat down near a few of the residents with whom I had begun hanging around. Ron, a short man aged about 50 with Down Syndrome, sat down next to me. With a big grin he looked up at me, put his hand on my arm, and announced in a loud voice, "You're my friend!". I felt the knot of anxiety and fear in me melt in the face of this warm acceptance. For me, it was a first step in becoming a friend with folk at the centre. I had gone along expecting to be some kind of saviour to these people, and found that Christ was already there to welcome me. I certainly received much more than I gave to this remarkable community of people.

Discuss

- *Tell a story about a time that you were involved in helping or serving others.*
- *Have you had a similar experience of seeing Christ in people whom you have tried to serve?*

God's Story

Read Isaiah 50:4-9a.

Servant Song

This passage is one of the Servant Songs in the second or middle section of the Book of Isaiah. The most well-known of these songs is chapter 53. These writings come from the time of the exile of the people of Israel in Babylon in the middle of the 6th century BC. While Christians can look back on these servant songs and see in them an image of Christ, for the Hebrew people in exile, this was not the case. For them, the question was how to find God's will for themselves in this time of captivity and humiliation. At times the servant seems to be describing the people of Israel; at other times the servant seems to be the prophet himself.

Here in chapter 50, the focus turns to the prophet. In the first verses, God reminds the people of Israel that they have not been forgotten. Their suffering is not due to God's weakness, instead it is a result of their own sin. The God of the Exodus still has the power to save them.

From verse 4 onwards, it seems that the prophet's message of hope has made him a laughing stock. His own people ridicule him when he speaks of God setting them free again. Here we see a picture of what Israel is called to be - a people who trust in God's power to save even when others ignore or punish them because of their faithfulness to God.

Discuss

- *Imagine that you are part of a community that has been held captive in a foreign country for over 50 years. For many in the community, Babylon is the only home that they know. How would you respond to people who speak of freedom and a return to the homeland?*
- *Now put yourself in the prophet's shoes. What would be it be like to be called by God to speak this message? A privilege or a pain?*
- *What does the example of this prophet say to you about what it means to be a servant of God?*
- *Who are the 'prophets' who speak of a hopeful future for your town? Are they listened to with respect or ridicule?*
- *What parallels can you see between the situation of the Israelites in exile and your situation today?*

Read Philippians 2:5-11.

Christ's Humility

It's hard to imagine how God could become a human being like you or me. Just for comparison, think for a moment about what it would be like for you to be trapped in the body of a slug! These verses describe how God becomes a servant in Jesus Christ. Paul makes it clear that it is God's free choice that the word becomes flesh.

What does Paul mean when he says that Jesus was 'in the form of God'? He could mean that Christ had the *nature* or qualities of God, or that Christ had the *status* of God because he was higher than anyone else. At any rate, the point is that Christ who has the form of God takes on the form of a slave. Paul explains this in verse 6 by saying that he 'emptied' himself: the Greek word here is *kenosis*.

According to Paul, Jesus' death is the ultimate sign of his obedience, humility and 'self-emptying'. Here we see that God's choice of Jesus of Nazareth as our Saviour connects with Jesus' choice to carry out God's purpose. It is not only *that* he died, but *how* he died - not in battle with a sword on a white horse, but on a Cross with thieves - which shows Jesus' obedience to God.

So Paul says that not only was Jesus a human being like us: he had a particular quality and attitude of being a servant. We don't think of people serving others as being a big deal, but when it is *God* doing the serving - that is really something! So there are two aspects of God's grace being described together here - God being *human*, and God being a human who *serves*.

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Discuss

- What does the passage say to you about Jesus and his mission from God?
- What questions does the passage raise for you about Jesus Christ?
- Jesus replaces our idea of God as a far-off King with a picture of God as a Servant who is close to us. How does this fit with your picture of God?
- Paul says that we should have the same mind or attitude that Jesus Christ had. What is it about Christ that we should be trying to copy?

Our Story

- Spend a short time in silence, reflecting on Christ who comes to you as a Servant. What do you want to ask of Christ at this time?
Share your thoughts with the group.
 - How might your words and actions be different if you had more of this servant attitude of Jesus Christ?
 - How might your congregation be different if people had more of this servant attitude of Jesus Christ?
 - Whom is God calling you to serve in your congregation at this time?
Write their names here.
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- Whom is God calling you to serve in your town at this time?
Write their names here.
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- Looking back over these Studies, what have you learned about
 - God
 - yourself
 - your church
 - God's vision or purpose for your church?

Prayer

Servant God,

take our lips and speak through them,

take our minds and think through them.

take our hearts and fill them with your compassion,

take our hands and use them to wash the feet of your world.

We offer ourselves as your servants,

to be a people whose lives are marked by faith, hope and love.

We offer ourselves as servants to one another,

to seek what is good for each person.

We offer ourselves as servants to your world,

knowing that we will meet you walking your streets.

We love you and give our lives to you. In the name of Christ. Amen