

Isaiah 42:1-7; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12

The Servant of the LORD

1. Introduction

The second main section of Isaiah (Chapter 40-66) contains four distinctive prophecies. The dominant theme in these chapters is *the Servant of the LORD*. Who is this Servant of the LORD?

The Ethiopian eunuch too asked Philip this question. This man was reading from the book of Isaiah while returning to his own country (Acts 8:26-40): "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about?"

Many words have been written in an attempt to answer the question who the Servant of the LORD might be. This question will also be the focus of our attention in this chapter, as well as the significance of "this servant" for us.

2. General remarks

1. *Servant*

The words "servant" and "servants" are used often in the book of Isaiah, especially in Chapter 40-66. The nation of Israel is called the servant of the LORD. The believers are called servants. This chapter deals with a strikingly special servant.

The word "servant" already indicates someone whose task it is to serve. This servant is commissioned by God to carry out an important task. Not only does this servant have a task to serve, but apparently he also has a very privileged position: the LORD has chosen him specifically and he therefore enjoys the support and love of his Sender (cf. 42:1).

2. *Who is the servant?*

Who exactly is this servant of the LORD? The answers given to this question would fit in several categories. I will list them below followed by a short review.

- a. This servant would be a well-known person in Israel's history. It could be Moses, Job or Zerubbabel; or one of the kings: Uzziah, Hezekiah or Josiah; or one of the prophets, e.g. Jeremiah or the so-called Deutero-Isaiah. In the latter case it would be an autobiography of a prophet who has to suffer for the sake of his work and sees this suffering as a calling from God.

We can argue against this opinion that the servant clearly is not just an ordinary person, for his task is extraordinary, very comprehensive and his relationship to the LORD is quite exceptional. Of whom can it be said that God makes him a "light for the Gentiles" (42:6; 49:6)? And of whom that "the punishment that brought us peace, was upon him", and that "the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (53:5-6)?

- b. This servant would be the nation or part of the nation, i.e. the pious ones.

But the prophecies about the servant reveal definite personal characteristics. Things are mentioned that could never be said of an entire nation. I would like to point in particular to the very personalized description of the suffering servant, in the third and fourth prophecy. It is true that at one point the servant is called "Israel" (49:3, see 3.3.2) but it is remarkable that the servant has a task with respect to the people and is therefore clearly distinguished from the nation (cf. 42:6; 49:5-6; the entire fourth prophecy).

- c. This servant would indeed be a person. Yet he identifies himself so well with the people that the distinction between him and the nation is no longer clear.

Here we can argue that the servant is clearly aware that he does his work *for* the people but does not represent them. He is the one without sin, who is punished for the sins of the people in order to justify them (Isaiah 53).

- d. The servant-prophecies would exclusively refer to the Messiah, who comes to redeem his people. Ages before already, Isaiah would have spoken very emphatically and graphically of his coming and work. This view has been defended of old by the Christian church.

Undoubtedly this view is the only correct one. Whoever takes a close look at the work of the servant must conclude that a mere human being cannot accomplish this. What is conclusive, however, is the fact that all four prophecies are quoted in the New Testament and clearly refer to Christ: he fulfils Isaiah's prophecy.

When the Ethiopian eunuch read from Isaiah 53, he asked Philip: "Who is the prophet talking about? Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35).

We see here the miracle of prophecy, namely that God is able to use his prophets to foretell the future in clear and penetrating language. And, as it is spoken, so it is fulfilled, through Christ. Jesus himself is also aware of it for he repeatedly refers to these words of Isaiah. (Therefore from here on we will capitalize the word "Servant".)

3. The Task of the Servant

We have already pointed out that the Servant has received a responsible and comprehensive task from the LORD. The Servant's life journey is also a turbulent one. He is called by the LORD to preach the gospel, but he will encounter great opposition. He will be mocked by the people; he must suffer and will be put to death. But in the end he will be victorious and his glory will be visible. As the chief prophet the Servant preaches God's Word. As the only high priest he offers himself and ultimately as the king he achieves the victory.

In the explanation of specific passages we will have a closer look at the work of the Servant.

4. Servant and servant

Isaiah often calls Israel "the servant of the LORD" (41:8; 44:21). Because Isaiah also speaks about the very special Servant of the LORD, the question arises what the connection is between this Servant and

“the servant Israel”?

The people of Israel were chosen by God to serve him, to be his people. But especially in the first chapters of Isaiah the Holy Spirit makes it clear that Israel was a very unfaithful servant.

Then the LORD appoints a better Servant, namely **the** Servant of the LORD. Yet, he does not reject his unfaithful people, but through the work of that special Servant he wants to make his people an obedient servant again. The Servant is appointed by the LORD “to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself (49:5). It is also said of him that by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many” (53:11).

It is the task of the Servant of the LORD to reconcile the unfaithful servant Israel to the LORD, and bring him back into faithful service.

5. Comparable texts in Isaiah

The four parts dealt with in this chapter are known as the four prophecies about the Servant of the LORD. There are, however, more passages that speak of a servant or a messenger who has a special relationship to the LORD that can be included with these prophecies. For instance 42:19 that speaks about the servant, the messenger whom the LORD sends; 48:16-17 that speaks of someone on whom the Spirit rests and who is sent by the LORD; 61:1-3 where also someone endowed with the Spirit, is sent to proclaim a message of salvation.

We cannot always determine exactly who this servant or messenger actually is. In 48:16-17 it could be the prophet himself. Christ points to himself as the One who fulfils the words of Isaiah 61:1-3 (Luke 4:17-21).

In this chapter we will limit our discussion to the four well-known prophecies about the Servant of the LORD.

3. Annotations to the text

1. The first prophecy, 42:1-7

In this first prophecy the LORD introduces the Servant to the people: “Here is my servant ... my chosen one.” The LORD announces which task the Servant will perform. This task is especially described as preaching the gospel and bringing about the salvation proclaimed in it.

The LORD speaks to the people about his Servant in verse 1-4, and in 5-7 the Servant himself is addressed.

Verse 1

God has chosen the Servant with special care. God loves him from the heart. God protects him and enables him through his Spirit to carry out his task.

The fact that the Servant “reveals God’s justice” means that he teaches them how God will continue his work with his people, how he brings forth his justice and truth. Perhaps we may also see this as an

answer to the doubt that still exists among God's people when they say "my cause is disregarded by my God" (40:27). It is possible that the Servant not only teaches them about God's justice, but also reveals that this justice will become a reality. He takes care to redeem them now that the time of suffering has ended.

Verse 2-4

The Servant will not appear in tumult or with violence, for he is gentle and mild. He lovingly cares for the people of the LORD in their need. The "bruised reed" he will not break, and the "smoldering wick" he will not quench. He takes pity on the people of God who are in distress because of their sin and judgement.

He will finish his work, even though he will be sure to experience many difficulties and enmity.

His work fills a vacuum. This applies not only to God's own people, but also the *coastlands*, the heathens, the "ends of the earth," *shall wait for his law*. This does not mean that the heathen people are consciously waiting for the work of the Servant. But his work does provide for the hopelessness of the peoples, even though they may not be aware of their need. Whoever comes to the knowledge of the Servant, will realize that his work is indeed the answer in their need.

Verse 5-7

A new instalment of this prophecy begins in verse 5. In the majestic opening words the LORD presents himself emphatically as the Almighty, the Creator who upholds the earth. It serves to underline the high position of the Servant: in the description of the Sender you should recognize the importance of his Servant.

This introduction also serves to clarify the all-encompassing work of the Servant. In him God provides for the world he created, and through him he will realize his purpose for this world.

The Servant works for the people of Israel. He is as it were the personification of the covenant: only through him will God restore the covenant with his people. Only in him can the people meet their God. The Servant is also the "light" for the nations. He is the light that shines in the world (see John 1: 4-9). When we read verse 7, we can think of the deliverance of Israel from exile, yet we should not lose sight of the fact that this deliverance is a prophecy of the complete deliverance that God will give to his people through the Servant.

2. The second prophecy, 49:1-7

In the second prophecy the Servant himself speaks. He begins with the words the LORD, his Sender, has spoken to him.

He addresses the entire world and makes known his calling. Apparently the Servant will not reap a great harvest among God's own people. But the meagre result in Israel does not mean that his work has failed; his task encompasses the whole earth.

In the second prophecy, the suffering of the Servant, as mentioned in the first prophecy, is brought to the fore.

Verse 1-3

The Servant explicitly has a word for the entire world. Already before he was born the LORD had designated him for this task. Compare the fulfillment of these words as well as the mention made of his name in Luke 1:26-38.

The LORD prepares the Servant for his task. He will be able to proclaim in a clear, forceful and effective manner, the word of his Sender. Thus the Servant becomes like “a polished arrow” in his “quiver”, a suitable instrument for his Lord.

God calls the Servant by the name “Israel”: in him he will glorify himself. The people of Israel had neglected their task as servant of the LORD; they were unfaithful in the service of the LORD. But this Servant is the man after God’s heart, with him God is well pleased; he fulfills for the people what they neglected to do. God’s greatness and goodness become visible in this Servant.

Verse 4-6

The Servant is disappointed by the meagre result of his work in Israel. We can think here of Israel’s rejection of the Christ. The poor harvest is not because the Servant did not carry out his task faithfully. Even so, the LORD does not cause his work to come to nothing. Not without reason did he choose him so carefully. He formed him “from his mother’s womb to be his servant”. Since Israel is unwilling to be gathered, God destines his Servant for a much grander task: he will be “a light for the Gentiles” (42:6). Here again it is obvious that there is no clear distinction between the return of Israel from exile, and the great work of salvation that God will bring about through Christ, not only for Israel, but for the whole world.

Verse 7

The LORD speaks to his Servant and encourages him. The Servant suffers humiliation; he is despised and abhorred. But he will again be exalted; even the mighty ones of the earth will be impressed by his work. Because of him they will praise God.

3. The third prophecy, 50:4-9

Also in this prophecy the Servant himself speaks. As in the second prophecy, he makes known his calling. It is related even more clearly in this prophecy than in the previous ones, how the Servant will experience opposition and suffering. It is also related that the LORD comes to his aid: whoever turns against him shall be crushed.

The verses 10 and 11 are usually included in this prophecy, yet they are distinctly different. In 4-9 the Servant is speaking, while in 10-11 the people are addressed.

These verses may be seen as a remark that typifies the prophecy about the Servant: the Servant speaks, but who listens to him? Those who listen may have full confidence in God, in spite of all the difficult implications that follow. He who resists, will destroy himself. Israel is given a direct choice: either for or against the Servant.

Verse 4-5

The Sovereign LORD teaches his Servant to speak as one who has been taught. That does not mean that the Servant still has to learn to speak. It indicates the result of the instruction: the Sender has

taught the Servant to speak eloquently. He has also taught him what he has to say (see John 8:26-29). Every morning anew the LORD gives him instructions. That is how the Servant is able to use his words for comforting: he is able to support the weary (see Matthew 11:28).

In these verses we can also see the willingness of the Servant to fulfil his task: he does not resist, but every day again he willingly accepts his instructions. Regardless of the opposition he encounters, he does not shrink back. “Your will be done” is the Servant’s motto (see Psalm 40:8; John 2:17; Luke 22:42). This prophecy reveals to us the daily interaction between Christ and his heavenly Father.

Verse 6-7

The Servant willingly submits to his suffering. To “pull out someone’s beard” and to “spit him in the face” are tokens of intense disdain. Compare this with the abuse and the mockery Christ endured during the last days of his life (see Matthew 26:67-68; 27:27-31). Even in suffering, the Servant remains steadfast, putting his trust in the LORD. He will not be disappointed and therefore he shows no sign of defeat.

Verse 8-9

The LORD will vindicate the Servant. The LORD is near to him. Therefore he can challenge his opponents: the LORD of the Servant will confront whoever opposes the Servant. He who accuses the Servant, will be condemned himself.

The Servant repeatedly uses the special name for God: the “Lord LORD”. The name “Lord” is used to address him: God is his Lord, his commander. The name “LORD” is God’s proper name, Yahweh. By using this name, the Servant confesses his own obedience and trust. At the same time he evokes awe and confidence in his hearers: I am coming in his name!

4. The fourth prophecy, 52:13-53:12

This section speaks very emphatically about the Servant’s suffering. It clearly outlines the reason for this suffering: he suffers in someone’s place; he, who is without sin, is punished for the sins of the people. While the suffering at its deepest point is related, it also becomes clear that, in spite of his humiliation, the Servant will ultimately be glorified, to the amazement of many

This part contains the most profound prophecies about Christ that we can find in the Old Testament. It almost seems as if Isaiah was an eyewitness of the suffering of Christ. Not without reason he is often called the evangelist among the prophets.

In the first verses the LORD speaks about his Servant. Then the Servant speaks on behalf of the people, or on behalf of the believers among the people. In the last two verses the LORD again speaks about his Servant.

Verse 13-15 (Isaiah 52)

These verses are an introduction to what follows. It mentions briefly what will be worked out in the verses that follow.

Whoever looked at the Servant was appalled. His suffering was so humiliating and he was so dehumanized that everyone who sees him shudders. Still the LORD proclaims that his work will not fail:

the Servant will prosper. As low as he was brought, so high shall he be exalted. The nations and the kings of the earth will be perplexed (see Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 2:5-10).

This is an outline of the work Christ had to accomplish. He has to go through the depths of hell, but ultimately he will be seated at the right hand of God.

Verse 1-3 (Isaiah 53)

The prophet can identify with the people because he belongs to this people, and he describes their reaction to the appearance of the Servant. The Servant's message is not acceptable to those who hear it. From the start he lacks all glory. He is like a tender plant that cannot survive without protection. His appearance is unattractive. Therefore he is despised and rejected by men. He is a *man of sorrows*: his entire existence is characterized by suffering.

Verse 4-7

Initially the people are of the opinion that God punishes the Servant on account of his own guilt. But they learn to see that the Servant has to suffer because of their sins. While the people deserve the punishment, the Servant takes their punishment upon himself and as a result the people may have peace with God. Here it becomes evident that the Servant accepts this suffering willingly. He does not resist and does not protest against the sorrow that is inflicted upon him.

Verse 8-10

Verse 8 could mean that the Servant is condemned to death without a proper trial. Even though he should be acquitted because they could find no guilt in him, still he is sentenced to death. Thus he is "cut off from the land of the living" and even after his death he is treated with disdain. Yet, he is "with the rich in his death".

This could point to the fact that Christ receives a royal burial in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. It could also mean that in the midst of death his victory is sure and his exaltation has begun: the Father honours the Christ, and the Servant's innocence is emphasized as well: in him is no unrighteousness.

The use of the word "guilt offering" is remarkable here. The Servant offers up himself in order to reconcile the people to God.

His work shall bear fruit: he will see his "offspring". Christ, the Son of God, transforms sinners into children of God. The Servant lives even after his death; because of him the work of the LORD will prosper.

Verse 11-12

The servant not only reveals God's plan of redemption, he also realizes it: he will "justify many". That is the fruit of his substitutionary suffering. After his suffering the Servant will receive a rich reward.

4. The meaning for today

The prophecies about the Servant of the LORD are well known, and rightly so. Centuries in advance Isaiah may speak plainly and clearly about the coming of the Christ and the significance of his work.

When speaking about the Servant, a great deal is revealed about God's great plan of salvation. The entire work of redemption is manifested in the appearance of the Servant. The coming of Christ is the future fulfillment of the prophecy of the return from the exile in Babylon. God gives his people restoration, because the promise of the Messiah still needs to be fulfilled. But it also becomes evident that the plan of redemption reaches much farther: the Servant has a message for the entire world; all the earth may hear it and share in his salvation. In his manifestation and speaking, God's wisdom is revealed to all the earth (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5).

We are repeatedly assured that the work of the Servant will be successful. This encourages everyone who believes in Christ. The work of Christ is not a dead-end road, even if it often appears that way in this world. On the contrary, Christ will conquer the opposition and uphold his church. This encourages all who have to suffer for their faith in Christ. Whoever shares in his suffering, may trust that he will also share in his glory. That goal is anchored in God's plan (see Romans 8:17, 28-30; 1 Peter 4:12-14).

As we delve into the prophecies about the Servant of the Lord, we are deeply affected by the great sacrifice offered freely by Christ. God allowed Isaiah to speak of it in advance, and Christ knew what awaited him. He voluntarily exchanged his exalted place in heaven for the most dreadful suffering.

He did all this for us. We should have suffered thus. It makes us ashamed, for we are the unfaithful servants of God; the faithful Servant was punished in our place. It also makes us thankful, for how wonderfully great is God's love for people who were his enemies.

5. Suggestions for the introduction and preparatory study

1. Use your concordance to find places where Isaiah uses the word *servant*. To whom can it refer? How is **the** Servant of the LORD different from the other servants of the Lord?
2. Study the four prophecies and determine what the work of the Servant entails. Also try to discover how that work continues into the future.
3. Using Lord's Day 12 of the Heidelberg Catechism, discuss the prophetic, priestly, and royal aspect of the work of the Servant.
4. Many Bibles have reference texts in the margin. Look up the references with regard to the four prophecies about the Servant. Explain how these prophecies were fulfilled in Christ.
5. Point out the similarities between Philippians 2:5-8 and the prophecies about the Servant.

6. Ideas for the discussion

1. God has put his Spirit upon his Servant (42:1). When was this prophecy fulfilled? Are there other incidents when people received the Spirit of God for particular assignments? And to what extent are you allowed to count on the help of God's Spirit for a specific task?
2. The Servant lovingly cares for the weak and sinful (42:3). Does this teach us how we should deal with weak and sinful people (cf. Galatians 6:1-2)? Is this valid also for those "who are outside"?

3. *The coastlands wait* for his law (42:4). Can you still say today that the world is waiting for God's work of salvation? What should our conclusion be with respect to the work of mission and evangelism?
4. Isaiah shows that the Servant provoked the people. How did this become apparent in Christ's life on earth? Do you as a Christian notice this provocation? Does it annoy you as a Christian that often you don't count in society?
5. The servant is revealed as a "light for the Gentiles" (42:6; 49:6). If these prophecies apply to Christ only, how can Paul apply these words to himself (see Acts 13:47)? Is there a connection to the fact that we ought to live as children of the light (see Ephesians 5:8 and 1 Thessalonians 5:5)?
6. Every morning again the Servant receives instructions from his Lord (50:4-5). What does that teach us with respect to our daily walk with God? Should we also look for daily instruction? And how will we know what these instructions are?
7. To what extent can we compare human suffering to the suffering of Christ?
8. Are we sufficiently aware of the fact that Christ suffered in our place? Is it of any use to stop and think about what we as sinners would have had to endure?

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