

“What a Savior!”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

(© 2019 by Robert M. Thompson. Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from The Holy Bible, New International Version, Copyright 2011 by New York International Bible Society.)

Jesus went to Hades so we won't have to.

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

April 14, 2019

(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

A hell of a sermon introduction

In our study of the Apostles' Creed, we come today to the phrase that raises more eyebrows than any other (with “the holy Catholic church” a close second). What does it mean that Jesus “descended into hell”? In three decades as a pastor, I've never had a good answer to that question. I decided today to try to give one.

In context, this part of the Apostles' Creed is trying to answer the question, “Where was Jesus between Friday afternoon and Sunday morning?” Have you ever thought about that? Are you OK with the answer, “he descended into hell”? It's related to the question, “Where will *you* be between your death and your resurrection?” Are you OK with saying you will be in hell?

Part of the problem is language. The word “descended” presumes a cosmology that we moderns reject. We understand the shape of the globe and a little about the shape of space itself. We don't literally think of heaven as being above and hell below, even if we still sometimes use that language. I would argue the Bible itself is using that language metaphorically, but that discussion is for another day.

The greater linguistic problem is with the word “hell.” I would put our use of “hell” in three categories – literal, profane, and metaphor. Most of us think first of hell literally – a place of separation from God, of punishment. It's the opposite of heaven.

Most of us avoid the profane uses of “hell” – at least I hope we do. Examples: “Go to hell!” or “What the hell!” Profanity is using a word that should be private or holy or serious and making it common.

As for metaphor, the word “hell” has also made its way into rather common expressions for whatever is extreme, usually extremely *negative*. Examples: “All hell broke loose.” “Rush hour was hell.” “That was a vacation from hell.” “My life is hell.”

“Hell” as a metaphor is sometimes even used positively. You might be watching the Masters and say, “That was a hell of a shot.” Someone once called me “a hell of a pastor.” I think he meant it as a compliment. I almost titled today’s sermon “A Hell of a Savior,” but my Thursday Bible study talked me out of it.

Hell in the Bible

The Bible also uses the word “hell” in different ways. If you want to find out what the Bible says about “hell,” you need to pay attention to which version of the Bible you’re reading. You’ll find about four times as many references (50-75) to “hell” in the *King James Version* and other, older translations than you will in the *New International Version* or *New Living Translation* or other more contemporary versions (15-20).

The reason is not that we’ve gone soft on hell. The reason is that the Hebrew word *Sheol* and its Greek counterpart *Hades* were usually translated “hell,” but rarely have to do with punishment. *Hades* is a synonym for “death” or “the grave”; at most referring to the afterlife. The Bible seems to suggest two sections or compartments of Hades – torment for the wicked and “Abraham’s bosom” for the righteous. Think of Jesus’ story about Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16. To clear up the confusion, newer translations don’t use “hell” for *Sheol* in the Old Testament or Hades in the New Testament.

Greek has a different word, *Gehenna*, that is almost always about punishment, usually eternal punishment. Almost all English translations use “hell” for that word.

So back to the question: What does it mean to say that Jesus “descended into hell”? Does it mean he suffered torment (*Gehenna*) for us when he paid for our sins? Or that he went to the place of the dead (*Sheol/Hades*) between Friday afternoon and Sunday morning? If the latter, what did he do there? Based on two passages in 1 Peter, some Christians believe he went there to preach to all who had died before he came, giving them the opportunity to believe.

And here’s a good question: Does all of this matter? My answer is yes and no. No, because the very fact that Christians can’t come to consensus about this makes it a non-essential. “He descended into hell” was the last phrase added into the creed, around AD 650. Yes, because there this phrase has been around for a millennium and a

half. One of my pet peeves is when we moderns think we're so much smarter than everyone who went before. Maybe we have something to learn from them.

Since there isn't one Scripture text that clearly lays out the meaning of "he descended into hell," I have chosen a passage that articulates Jesus' hell in all its forms more than any other. Surprisingly, we find this passage in the Old Testament. After we look at Isaiah 53, I'll come back to why "he descended into hell" matters to us.

The Gehenna you deserve

I've referred to Isaiah 53, but there's an unfortunate chapter division in our Bibles. The poem of the Suffering Servant actually begins in 52:13 and includes five stanzas that end with 53:12. This is the final of the Servant Songs in Isaiah, the one that culminates a vision God gives to provide hope for the hopeless.

Christians read this passage differently than Jews do, as you might imagine. Jews see "the suffering servant" as Israel. I won't spend my time today arguing that point. I'm simply going to treat the text the way it's been treated by believers in Jesus since the time of the New Testament. This is a prophetic description of Jesus, written centuries in advance. Its detailed parallel to the Gospels is truly remarkable.

The original historical context in Isaiah is a message to Israel in exile. They are in Babylon because their idolatry and rebellion were so terrible, God allowed Babylon to destroy the nation, the temple, and seemingly hope itself. We can't properly read this passage without an awareness of our sin as well. If we study it intellectually, we will leave unmoved and unchanged. I don't want just your *mind* today. I want your *heart*.

For us to read this passage differently, I first need you to dwell for a moment with your worst self. Think of the moment in your life when you were furthest from God, when you felt justly punished by him, when you came to the awareness that your life was a mess, and you deserved the mess because of the hardness of your heart and choices to sin and rebel. Maybe that's right now for someone here.

For others, it might be different, maybe not quite so dramatic. But I need you, too, to tear off the defenses and excuses and own the worst of your heart – the pride, the lust, the envy, the anger, the baggage, the broken relationships, the greed, the people you avoid, the injustice you overlook and excuse, the racism, the condescension... need I go on?

Don't hear Isaiah 53 thinking about someone else's sin, someone else who got what they deserved. Read it with heaviness about your own brokenness, your own awareness of repeated spiritual failure.

Hear or read Isaiah 53 thinking about the *Gehenna* you and I truly deserve. This is not a sterile piece of information. This passage binds together Old Testament and

New Testament more than perhaps any other text, especially in the Old Testament. There's nothing quite like this anywhere else in the Bible. This is the Gospel.

Let's pause for a time of confession. This is Holy Ground.

Typically at this point, I would explain the passage, verse by verse. Today I won't do that. I'm going to read through it, but in my own paraphrase. Because of our theme today, I will use the word "hell" in my paraphrase.

Lower than hell

13 Pay attention to YOUR GOD! My Servant will flourish.

You will have to look up to see him – lofty, glorious, higher than high!

14 At first, he was lower than hell. Many people looked down at him, disgusted.

He was literally de-faced. Those who saw him didn't think he was human.

15 My servant exploded over the nations, stunning kings into silence.

Now they were seeing the unimagined, understanding the unheard.

1 Who would ever have believed this? It's outrageous and farfetched.

The power of OUR GOD is the only explanation – God's biceps on display.

2 Fragile at first, the servant sprouted as a scrawny seedling from hell on earth.

We didn't look twice at him. No beauty, no dignity, no magnetism.

3 We despised him, passing over this nobody disabled by pain and heartache.

We hid our faces, patronizing this pitiful form. We thought him nothing.

4 Do not miss this! He was buckling under the weight of our pain and heartache.

We thought God was pummeling him, giving him hell for his own evil.

5 But he was speared for our rebellions, flattened for the blame that was ours.

He suffered hell to give us peace. His flogging healed us.

6 We have all roamed around like clueless sheep doing our own thing,

And OUR GOD has heaped on his servant the hell we deserved.

7 He was exploited and humiliated like a slave, but never protested.

Like a sheep he was butchered and sheared, but kept as quiet as they do.

8 Falsely caged and judged, no one at that time cared when he was carted off,

Hacked from the land of the living, plagued for my people's rebellions.

9 He shared his end with criminals and a rich man; we didn't understand.

He had never harmed anyone with his hands, his heart, or his mouth.

10 OUR GOD delighted in crushing and harming his servant as a guilt-offering.

He will see descendants, he will live again, he will do OUR GOD's desire.

11 After his soul faces hell, he will be satisfied with knowing God.

My faultless servant will make others faultless, bearing their punishment.

12 I, YOUR GOD, will honor and reward him because he stared down hell.

He entered the fraternity of sinners, and reconciled rebels to God.

So we don't have to

Somehow it no longer seems as important that we pin down the precise meaning of “he descended into hell.” It’s only a phrase we use to describe the indescribable. Whatever the word means in the Creed – hell on earth, death and the grave, a temporary holding place, torment, eternal separation from God – what matters is that Jesus went there, and he went there for us.

So let me go back to the question I raised earlier. Where was Jesus between Friday afternoon and Sunday morning?

I believe that Jesus took our *Gehenna* while he was on the cross. When he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he was bearing our hell – separation from God. As an eternal Person, he could bear an eternal punishment as he hung there. As God, he could suffer for the sins of the whole world. When he cried out, “It is finished,” his *Gehenna* was done.

Then what? I believe he went to Hades – to the section of Hades for those who had died in faith. I believe he joined Lazarus and Abraham and Moses and Joshua and David and Elijah and Isaiah there. It’s what he meant when he said to the thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Remember, Paradise is a kind of section of Hades. It’s why the word “hell” for Hades is confusing.

So what did he do there? I don’t know. But this I believe. That was the end of Hades – at least the Paradise compartment. He put an end to that waiting for the righteous. (I need to insert here that “waiting” has to do with time anyway, and I’m not sure there is a time dimension after we leave earth.)

When Jesus comes back from the dead on Sunday morning, he had accomplished one final aspect of our salvation. He had gone to the place of the dead; he had been in Hades. Why? To strip its power. In Revelation 1:18, Jesus says, “I hold the keys to death and Hades.”

From that point on, the New Testament deals differently with death and Hades. Peter says on the day of Pentecost, quoting from Psalm 16, that Jesus “was not abandoned to Hades.” He went there, but he wasn’t left there. From then on, Paul will say things like, “To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.”

So what do we mean by saying Jesus “descended to the dead”? We mean that he went to Hades so we don’t have to. He had already been in *Gehenna* on the cross. Now he went to Hades, taking one last aspect of our hell so that our souls can now go immediately to be with the Father while we wait for the resurrection of our bodies.¹

¹ [Click here](#) for a fuller explanation of this view of “he descended into hell.”

Am I absolutely sure I'm right about that? No. But I live with the full confidence that Jesus did everything necessary to provide for our salvation, including accepting every aspect of hell on our behalf. It's why we now gather around his table to remember and proclaim who he is and what he did. What a Savior! Amen.