The Experience of hell (and hope)

Text: Psalm 22

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**Scriptures:** Luke 23:44-49; Psalm 22

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 22c, 266, 276, 169

Series: Heidelberg Catechism LD16Q&A44

Theme: David the Psalmist cries out to God in the anguish of his suffering and abandonment whilst continuing to trust in the Lord’s coming blessing to the nations

Proposition: Christ experienced hell, so that we could experience hope

**Introduction**

In Apostles Creed we recite the words: “was crucified, dead & buried, he descended into Hell”. Whilst the meaning of the words ‘crucified’, ‘dead’ and ‘buried’ are clear, the same is not true of the phrase ‘he descended into hell’. These words have been the source of much debate and disagreement over the years.

What exactly do we mean when we say these words, together with millions of Christian around the world each Lord’s Day? The interpretation hinges on what is meant by the word “hell” here. At least four possibilities have been suggested through history:

1. **Hell** = A place where OT saints were (Limbus Patrum). These saints were said to be waiting for Christ to reveal the gospel to them and take them to heaven. The Roman Catholic church teaches Christ descended to such a place after he was buried.

This view is based on 1 Pet 3:18-20, a passage which has been described by Commentator Robert Mounce (in his commentary Living Hope) as "widely recognized as perhaps the most difficult to understand in all of the New Testament."

1. **Hell** = the underworld where Satan and the evil angels dwell. Lutherans teach that Christ descended there in order to defeat the powers of darkness.

There are significant problems with these two views. The Old Testament saints were saved by faith in God’s promise of a Redeemer which was not fulfilled in their lifetimes. Christ’s victory was completed on the cross with the words “it is finished”. The most holy place curtain was rent, and tombs opened. Christ said to the criminal on cross beside Him “today you will be with me in paradise”.

1. “**Hell**” means the same as to be buried, go down to the grave

This meaning is well supported historically. The Apostle’s Creed was not written by the Apostles themselves, but this pattern of words was first put together around 150AD, probably in Rome. In the 8 or 9th century Charlemagne wanted to bring uniformity to the creed. He replaced older ‘Roman creed’ which didn’t contain this phrase. This phrase then emphasises literal death of Christ. We find a parallel thought to this expressed in WCF (8.8.4) “*He was buried and remained under the power of death for a time*”.

There are two difficulties with this interpretation: Firstly, this would mean that there is duplication in a brief summary creed and secondly, the events listed would be out of chronological sequence “crucified, dead and buried, dead (He descended into Hell)”.

1. **Hell**=state of extreme suffering which Christ underwent during his life, up to and especially including pain of the cross. This is the Reformed teaching brought out in HCLD16A44.

The reference to the descent into Hell then refers to Christ “suffering unspeakable anguish, pain and terror of soul, especially on the cross but also earlier”. If you look on p8 of our ‘Creeds, Confessions and Liturgical Forms book’ you’ll see a footnote to the words ‘Descended into Hell’ from the Apostles Creed. “*That is, on the cross Jesus suffered the agony of hell which our sins deserved*”.

What does the ‘anguish and torment of hell’ feel like? Psalm 22 helps us to gain a greater understanding. Many parts of this Psalm are well known from many citations and allusions in the New Testament (e.g. Matt 27:35, 39, 43, 46; John 19:23,24,28; Heb 2:12). We’re going to look at this Psalm of David under three headings:

a) Abandonment

b) Loss

c) Hope

1. **Abandonment**

Imagine you are in the water, close to shore in heavy swell with an offshore current. There on the rocks a few meters away from you is the person who has loved you most in life, your father/mother/ husband/wife/best friend. They see you; they know you are drowning, but they turn and walk away, carrying the rescue rope in their hand. When someone leaves you when you desperately need them, they forsake you, they abandon you. You are discarded, jettisoned, castaway.

What is it like to experience that kind of anguish and pain? David, the Psalmist, had many enemies and went through many difficulties in his life. He experienced the loss, real and or perceived, of his relationship with God. His pain is evident in the opening questions of Psalm 22: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?*”

As you are pulled out to deeper and deeper water by the current, gasping for air amongst the crashing waves, you would likely call out to the person who has loved you and who has turned their back to you. You would likely continue to call out until you ran out of breath. David writes: v2 “*O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest*”.

David is not crying out to an impersonal deity, he is pleading with the covenant God of Israel, his God, the One who had rescued him so many times. Remember his words to Saul before he went out to slay Goliath: "*The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine." And Saul said to David, "Go, and the LORD be with you!*" (1 Sam 17:37)

The Lord had been with David throughout his life, but not now; at least that is how it **seemed** to him. Hear his cry that God would be near to him once again: “*O LORD, do not be far off! O you my help, come quickly to my aid! Deliver my soul from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dog! Save me from the mouth of the lion! You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen*!” God, you’ve done it before, do it again! HELP ME!

**To be abandoned by God is the very essence of Hell.**

David’s anguish and torment also included being deserted by people. He feels very vulnerable, very small, very insignificant. Like a small soft creature with a long cylindrical tube-like body and no [limbs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Limb_%28anatomy%29). “*But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people*”. In times past he had been a leader, looked up to by others. A man with authority and status, influence and power, but now abandoned. Alone, isolated, without close supportive human relationship. This is also part of the experience of Hell.

But more than just abandonment by humankind, David is actively scorned, derided, and sneered at by all who observe his plight. Imagine a crowd assembling on the rocks as you struggle in the violent swell. They come, not to help, but to watch the spectacle of you slowly drowning. They think it’s funny, they think you deserve such a fate, they laugh and make jokes.

Surely if the One with the rope really loved you then He would have saved you. “*All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!*" (v7&8) To know that you have been abandoned by the One who has the power to deliver you. This is the anguish and torment of Hell.

However, despite David’s sins, he trusted the Lord, and was a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22). He experienced abandonment, but was never actually forsaken by God. The same is **not true** of David’s greater descendant Christ Jesus. When he cried out the words of Psalm 22 v1 in his 1st language Aramaic “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*” (Mark 15:34), He was forsaken by His Heavenly Father, the One who had ‘*loved him before the foundation of the world*’ (John 17:24).

How was this possible? Because, brothers and sisters in our Lord, “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Cor 5:21).

Even if you are someone who has been abandoned by your father, your mother, your husband, your wife, your best friend, the fullness of the depth of forsakenness of Christ on the cross is incomprehensible to us as human beings. Christ most certainly did suffer ‘unspeakable anguish, pain, and terror of soul’ when he was abandoned by God at Calvary, experiencing the ‘anguish and torment of hell’. Something of this is represented by the unnatural darkness which descended on the whole land for three hours before his death. ‘The sun’s light failed’ (Luke 23:44-45a).

Some of us have experienced abandonment in various ways. Sometimes we can feel that God has deserted us in our pain. Sometimes other people do not minister to us in our grief and anguish. Sometimes people even laugh at us in our struggles. Brothers and sisters, sometimes it feels like our Saviour has abandoned us.

Well, it may seem that way, but it isn’t true! It wasn’t true for David, and it isn’t true for God’s people. God will not leave you, nor forsake you (Josh 1:5; Heb 13:5), because Jesus has delivered you from the anguish and torment of hell!

The experience of hell is that of abandonment, the forfeiture of relationship, but there are also other losses, with brings us to our 2nd point

1. **Loss**

Swimming in the local pool, being able to touch the side every 25m is not very hard. For much of the lane the water is not deep, it’s possible to stop and stand up with your head above the surface. However, it’s a bit different when you’re out in the open water of a lake or the sea, far from the shallows. There’s a loss of security when you can’t touch the bottom, when there’s no one close by to rescue you.

That’s how David felt when he wrote Psalm 22. It wasn’t the water which he was threatening his life, but multiple enemies, expressed in the image of dangerous animals – v12,13&16: “*Many bulls encompass me; strong bulls of Bashan surround me; they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion*”; “*For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet*”. This is the experience of insecurity, a loss of protection, refuge and shelter.

Also, a loss of physical wellbeing. David had been wounded by his enemies. His body pierced. His joints are dislocated, and he can feel the pain of each one. His was a great loss of good health, of vitality: “*I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death*” (Ps 22:14-15).

Notice that David recognizes the sovereign purpose and power of God in his mortal affliction ‘**You** lay me in the dust of death’. When you think that God is against you, you feel something of the essence of hell in your soul.

David experienced a loss of security, a loss of health both in body and in soul, he also experienced a loss of covering. In a public place nakedness is shameful and humiliating. It is a great loss of dignity. He is exposed because he has been stripped of his clothing “*they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots*” (v18).

David wrote prophetically about Christ who was yet to come. We know this because the sufferings identified in the Psalm were the sufferings of Christ. He was mocked, despised and rejected; His joints would have been dislocated on the cross; He strength ebbed away as he died an excruciatingly painful death; His hands and feet were pierced; His garments were divided and lots cast to see who would have them (Matt 27:35).

Part of the essence of hell is the loss of all that is good including safety, health and dignity.Hell is a place of shame. Why did Christ endure so much loss? Brothers and sisters, to deliver us from the anguish and torment of hell.

Sometimes we can feel very insecure, very vulnerable, fragile and weak. Remember that this is always true: “*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble*” (Psalm 46:1). In this life we all experience some degree of loss of good health. Remember that Christ understands. Remember also that these bodies we have now are going to be upgraded in the future. ‘For this perishable body must put on the imperishable’ (1 Cor 15:53).

Sometimes we may experience great uncertainty about our own salvation. Remember what Jesus said about all who believe on him: John 10:27-29 “*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand*”.

Sometimes we feel great guilt and shame. There is no place for this in a life characterized by repentance and faith in Christ as these Scriptures demonstrate. “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). **“***There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*” (Romans 8:1).

Brothers and sisters in our Lord, God has provided a covering for our shame. Remember how He made garments of animal skin for Adam and Eve so that they would be adequately clothed. So God has provided a covering for us in the shedding of Christ’s blood so that we can be clothed in His righteousness.

The experience of hell is one of abandonment and loss, but all who are in Christ have every reason to hope, which brings us to our last point:

1. **Hope**

‘*Abandon hope all ye who enter here*’ is a well-known line from Dante’s epic poem ‘The Divine Comedy’. Dante imagined this as the inscription on the gate of Hell. There’s absolutely no Scriptural evidence for such an ominous set of words at the entrance to Hell, but the meaning is thoroughly Biblical.

Hell is a place with no hope for those who enter into that state. As Jesus said of those who pass that way on the Day of Judgement “*These will go away into eternal punishment*” (Matt 25:46). To be without any hope is an awful anguish and torment – the most acute pain to the soul.

As we’ve seen Psalm 22 points forward to the anguish and torment of Christ which he experienced throughout his life, but ‘especially on the cross’. However, this Psalm does more than this, it also looks ahead in **hope** to the fulfilment of God’s promises, a hope grounded the Lord’s past acts of deliverance.

Notice how David declares the ‘set apart’ character of God, praised by His chosen people who were not abandoned by Him, but brought to safety from the clutches of their enemies: *Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried and were rescued; in you they trusted and were not put to shame (Ps 22:3-5).* David feels alone, but He is part of God’s hopeful covenant people who praise him and obey Him because they trust that He will deliver them. From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will perform before those who fear him. The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD! May your hearts live forever! (Ps 22:25-26).

Hope brings great confidence in the future fulfilment of God’s promises to bless the nations through the seed of Abraham in v27-31 “*All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you. For kingship belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations. All the prosperous of the earth eat and worship; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, even the one who could not keep himself alive. Posterity shall serve him; it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation; they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it.”*

The work of rescuing God’s people from every tribe, tongue and nation has been done. It was completed by Christ who said *“*"*It is finished,"* and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:30) Jesus died, having suffered the agony of hell which our sins deserved. He experienced Hell, with the awful abandonment and loss that entails so that we could experience hope.

Certain hope that we will never experience Hell, only Heaven. A realm where there is only adoption, acceptance, and joy. A new world where we will see our Lord face to face . We will meet in the flesh the One who suffered so much for us.

Whatever suffering you and I, brothers and sisters in our Lord, may experience in this life, we can remain certain of these things: our acceptance by God in Christ, the riches of our inheritance in Him and sure hope in the glories of the New Heavens and New Earth to come.

AMEN