Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Every now and then you hear mention of ‘taboo’ topics; certain things that people just avoid talking about. And this is often in the context of a desire that a particular topic should be talked about way more often. Probably the best example is **mental health**. For example, for a long time, depression had a negative stereotype and people just avoided talking about it. But through the courage of people like Sir John Kirwan and others, talking about depression and seeking help for it is a lot more common than it once was.

But talking about something more commonly isn’t always more helpful. And one example of this is **hell**. There was a time when the word ‘hell’ was very rarely mentioned in public, and when it was the room would go quiet and pretty much everyone present would experience a moment of horror because they all understood what hell is. But today, the word ‘hell’ has become a common part of casual language, used just as an expression of surprise or emphasis. And hell as a place has been the subject of so many jokes and movies and TV shows that it no longer bothers most people in the slightest. And the irony of this reality is that while referring to hell has become more common in the world, there is one place where referring to hell has become less common. And that place is? You guessed it – the church! In much of today’s church hell has disappeared from sermons either because particular churches or denominations no longer believe that hell is real, or, even if they do believe that hell is real, they avoid talking about hell because they prefer positive and nice topics that don’t frighten people away from church.

So, what does the Bible say about hell?

* Well, **Revelation 20:10** tells us thatthe devil and his angels and all unbelievers will be “*thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur … and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever*.”
* And when Jesus spoke about hell, He used a nearby place name to illustrate hell so that His readers knew exactly what hell is like. You see, just south of Jerusalem there was a place called *Ge-Hinnom*, meaning ‘the Valley of Hinnom.’ In Greek it became ***Gehenna***. And you will remember from our Leviticus studies that all of the carcasses of sacrificed animals had to be taken outside of the camp to an unclean place where they were burned. Well, once the temple was established at Jerusalem, Gehenna was the unclean place where thousands of animal carcasses were burned every year. And sadly, in Old Testament times, it also became the place where the people of Israel would sacrifice their new born babies to the fire idol – Molech. But even after this abominable practice stopped, it continued to be the place where corpses of criminals, dead animals, and all manner of rubbish was thrown to be burned and destroyed. It was a place utterly filthy, disgusting, and repulsive to the nose and eyes. And this place, Gehenna, is what Jesus referred to to illustrate hell. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus said that you do not want to be thrown into *Gehenna*, a place of [eternal torment](https://www.gotquestions.org/hell-real-eternal.html) and constant uncleanness, where the fires never cease burning and the worms never stop crawling. And our English Bible versions have ‘hell’ where Jesus used the name *Gehenna*.

So is hell a real place? Absolutely. Is it an awful place? Most definitely. Should we use the word ‘hell’ as a kind of emphasis word or joke about it, the way that the world does? Certainly not.

You see, hell is where sinners deserve to spend all eternity. The bible is very clear that the wages of sin is death, by which is meant dying and then eternal punishment of body and soul in hell. But the message of the gospel is that Jesus, the Son of God, came to earth to take the punishment that we deserve. So He *died* in our place and He *endured hell, or eternal punishment of body and soul* so that we would not have to. And what we want to focus on today is His enduring eternal hell in our place. And our key question is: **When and how did He do this**? When and how did Jesus endure hell in our place?

Now, some of us have been reciting the Apostles’ Creed since we were knee high to a grasshopper. And part of it goes like this: Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead.” And this raises two questions: First, if this is a **sequence** **of** **events**, then it sounds like Jesus descended into hell some time during the three days that His body was in the tomb. So we will have to see if that is what is meant and if that is what the Bible teaches. And the second question is: The language of a descent into hell sounds like ‘travel language,’ that Jesus went somewhere. And again, we will have to see if this is what is meant and if this is what the Bible teaches.

So with what we have said about our salvation needing Jesus to endure eternal punishment of body and soul in our place and the creed’s reference to His descent into hell, this afternoon we want to see **how Jesus’ descent into hell provides precious comfort for believers**. And we will do this by first of all considering what Jesus’ descent into hell ***is not***, and then what Jesus’ descent into hell ***is***.

1. So, first of all, what Jesus’ descent into hell ***is not***.
   1. The phrase, “He descended into hell,” was added to the Apostles’ Creed in AD 390. And it was put where it is in the Creed very deliberately. As I said a moment ago, it comes after, “was buried,” and before, “on the third day He rose again from the dead.” And that is because the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is that Jesus literally went to hell, or the place of the dead, after He had died and before He rose again. The Catholic Catechism says, “In his human soul united to his divine person, the dead Christ went down to the realm of the dead. He opened heaven's gates for the just who had gone before him.” You see, Roman Catholic theology teaches something called the ***Limbus Patrum***. I am sure you heard the expression, being in limbo, before. It means waiting. And so, the *Limbus Patrum* is ‘the place where the Fathers wait’; it is where the souls of Old Testament believers went to wait after they died. And that place was necessary because salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ? So, they could not go directly to heaven because they did not know Jesus Christ and what He came to do. So after His death, Jesus went to the *Limbus Patrum*, and He revealed Himself to those Old Testament believers, who then put their faith in Him, and were then able to go to heaven. That is how Roman Catholic theology understands “He descended into hell.”
      1. And if you are wondering, Wow! Where does that idea come from? It comes from the many Old Testament references to ‘Sheol’ and one New Testament passage in particular that we will look at in a moment.
         1. **Sheol** is mentioned 65 times in the Old Testament. It basically means ‘the place of death.’ And because David said things like, “*For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol*,” in Psalm 16, and,“*But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol*,” in Psalm 49, the idea of the *Limbus Patrum* – a temporary place for dead Old Testament believers, was developed.
         2. And the New Testament passage behind the idea is one we really need to turn to and look at together. It is **1 Peter 3:18-20** (p. 1016). “*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water*.”
         3. And if, having read this passage, you are scratching your head and wondering what is that all about, you are in good company ☺ In Martin Luther’s commentary on this passage, he said, “This is a strange text, and a more obscure passage, perhaps, than any other in the New Testament, for I do not certainly know what … Peter means.” And pretty much every other commentator says something similar.
         4. And we could devote a whole sermon to this passage, which we may do one day, but it is verse 19’s the spirit of Christ going and proclaiming “to the spirits in prison” phrase that is the other major part of this *Limbus Patrum* belief.
         5. But congregation, there are many questions that arise from this passage: Is it talking about something Jesus did *after* He died or *during Noah’s day*? You can make a case for both possibilities. Could His being made alive mean after His resurrection? It usually does in Scripture. Is this passage talking about something that *Jesus* did or something that His Spirit, the Holy Spirit, did? What was proclaimed? And were the spirits in prison the spirits of *humans* or *angels*? And that question is important because the **traditional Lutheran understanding** of this passage rejects the whole idea of the *Limbus Patrum* in favour of the idea that Jesus descended to hell itself and proclaimed His victory to Satan and all his demons. So while they were celebrating His death, He appeared and kind of did the biggest Gotcha ever! I am *not* dead! I have defeated you!
         6. But even apart from all of these textual and doctrinal questions, what is the first thing you should consider when you are looking at a passage? The **context**. And as ever, the context of this passage is hugely important for interpretation.
      2. Now, as I said, we don’t have time to work through all of these things. But congregation, when you develop a theology around what is commonly understood as one of the most difficult passages in the Bible, you are on very shaky ground. And you have heard me explain before that when it comes to Bible interpretation, **the plain must always explain the less plain**.
2. And we won’t be able to do this completely until we have finished our second point, but I will now state what we are going to see as we do that, which is that the descent into hell is not about something that Jesus did *after* He died, but about something He did *before* He died. And let’s see what this was as we turn our attention, secondly, to What Jesus’ descent into hell ***is***.
   1. And I don’t expect that where we start in relation to this point will surprise any of you because you have heard me refer to these three words that Jesus spoke on the cross, many, many times: “***It is finished***.” Congregation, if you knew I was painting the manse and I told you I was finished but I then spent two more days painting, I would have lied to you. And similarly, if Jesus still had to do something in relation to enduring the punishment that our sins deserved after He died, then the words “*It is finished*” would be a lie. But those three words, “It is finished,” are the truth; It was finished. There is nothing more that Jesus needed to do and there is nothing more that you can do; “*It is finished*.” So in terms of the plain explaining the less plain, these three words are pretty plain – what Jesus needed to do, which was to endure eternal punishment of body and soul, in our place, was finished!
   2. And to back this idea up and to point us in the direction of what Jesus’ descent into hell is about, let’s turn next to **Hebrews 5:7-10** (p. 1003). And you will see that this is a Scripture reference for Question and Answer 44. There we read, “*In the days of His flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to Him who was able to save him from death, and He was heard because of His reverence. Although He was a son, He learned obedience through what He suffered. And being made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him*.”
      1. So note, first of all, the first six words: “***In the days of His flesh***.” The NIV puts it this way: “*During the days of Jesus' life on earth*…” So what Jesus did to become the source of eternal salvation, He did when He was alive or before He died and rose again with His glorified body.
      2. And what the author of Hebrews points to particularly are **the prayers of Jesus**, offered with “*loud cries and tears* *to Him who was able to save Him from death*,” meaning His Father. And that is why we read those two passage in Matthew before:
         1. In **Matthew 26:37-39**, Jesus was in the **Garden of Gethsemane**. We read, “*And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, He began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then He said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me."*” And then, three times, He prayed, “*My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will*.” And do you remember how Luke describes Him as He prayed? “*And being in an agony He prayed more earnestly; and His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground*.” This is hellish agony!
         2. And then we read from **Matthew 27**, which describes the **three hours of darkness** that descended over Jerusalem as Jesus hung on the cross. And at the end of those three hours, Jesus cried out, “‘*Eli, Eli, lama Sabachthani?’ which means, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” And to be forsaken of His Father was hell for Jesus! To have the light of day removed and to be cloaked in darkness and to feel the holy and eternal wrath of His Father being poured out upon Him, was total and utter hell.
         3. But because Jesus was fully God, He was able to endure that eternity of punishment in body and soul that all the elect of God deserve during the three hours of darkness. And having done this, He could say and mean, “*It is finished*.”
   3. And what all of this means, brothers and sisters and young people and boys and girls, is Jesus’ descent into hell is not about something He did *during the three days in the tomb* or about a *place* that He went to. As the explanatory footnote under the creed says, “That is, on the cross Jesus suffered the agony of hell which our sins deserved.” And as our Question and Answer puts it: “Christ my Lord, by suffering unspeakable anguish, pain, and terror of soul, especially on the cross but also earlier, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell.” Jesus’ descent into hell is about Him suffering the agonies of hell on the cross and earlier. That is what the Bible teaches and that is how we should understand that phrase in the Apostles’ Creed.
   4. And this has at least two implications for all of us here today, which we will state very briefly:
      1. The first has to do with eternity: What we all deserve is death followed by eternal punishment of body and soul in the fires of hell. But Jesus suffered the agonies of hell while on the cross and then He died, so that all who believe in Him, while they must still die, will not be condemned to hell but instead welcomed into heaven.
         1. And while salvation should not be all about the fear of hell, as we have seen, hell is a real and awful place. Are you confident that you are not going to hell? **1 John 5:13** says, “*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life*.” If you believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that He endured hell while on the cross and died in your place, then you may be sure that you have eternal life. And I pray that you believe this because hell is real.
      2. But the second has to do with the here and now: Our Catechism Question and Answer says, Jesus descended into hell “*to assure me in times of personal crisis and temptation that … [He] has delivered me from the torment and anguish of hell*.” I expect that there are some here today who feel so guilty of sin that they are not sure that God can love them and that He must surely send them to hell?
         1. Well, King David was guilty of Adultery and murder. But he trusted in God for the forgiveness of his sins. That is why he said, “*For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol*,” and,“*But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol*.” He knew that his body would not be left in the grave; that he would be raised to enjoy eternal life in heaven
         2. And you know more than David did! You know that Jesus suffered the eternal punishment of body and soul that you deserve. He has delivered you from the anguish and torment of hell. He said, “*It is finished*.” So confess your sins and turn away from your sins and believe in what Jesus did and what Jesus said.

Be at peace. Trust in Jesus. Amen.