

The Lenten Meditations 2024
Episode 5: Redemptive Suffering
By Tara Ludwig



The Descent into Hell (1568) by Jacopo Tintoretto
Hangs in San Cassiano Church in Venice, Italy

In Matthew 20:28 Jesus says, “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” When we hear that word “ransom”, I’m guessing most of us probably imagine something like a scene from a Hollywood movie, where a ransom

of an outrageous sum of money is demanded in exchange for a hostage or someone who's been kidnapped. The trade is money for freedom. But the ransom that Jesus tells us *he* will offer on our behalf is not paid with money, but with his *life*; he gives his very life so that we will be free. This understanding is at the heart of the mystery of the crucifixion, what we call in theological language the *redemptive suffering* of Jesus: our Christian belief that we were redeemed through Jesus' willingness to suffer and die for our sake.

Interestingly, the word "redeem" stems from a Latin verb meaning "to buy back". In an ancient world in which slavery and bondage were a cultural norm, to "redeem" someone meant to pay the price to buy them back from their owners. Now, we may not be literal slaves, but in a spiritual sense, we are indeed captives living in occupied territory, enslaved by the bonds of sin and death. So when Jesus *redeemed* us through his suffering on the cross, he was, through the price of his life, *buying us back* from the captivity of sin, so that we are no longer owned by evil, but by God Himself.

This redemption is dramatically fulfilled in an often-overlooked event in Jesus' life known as "The Harrowing of Hell". You may have noticed, in the Apostles' Creed, a perplexing line in which we confess that after Jesus "was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended into Hell". Wait, *what?* Jesus went... to *hell*?

Far from being a fringe doctrine, Jesus' descent into hell has been widely taught since the early days of the Christian church. It is alluded to numerous times throughout the New Testament, for example, in 1 Peter where we read that Jesus "went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison...For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does"ⁱ. The Catechism of the Catholic Church has this to say: "By the expression 'He descended into Hell', the Apostles' Creed confesses that Jesus did really die and through his death for us conquered death and the devil 'who has the power of death' (Hebrews 2:14). 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."

We might be tempted to just skim over this bizarre teaching, but it's worthwhile to pause and wonder what the Creed means when it says that Jesus descended into Hell after he died, because it is a beautiful illustration of the extent of his redemptive suffering. Let us listen in on an excerpt of an ancient homily called *The Lord Descends into Hell*, traditionally read as part of the Office of Readings on Holy Saturday:

Something strange is happening — there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence because the King is asleep. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began. God has died in the flesh and Hell trembles with fear. He has gone to search for our first parent, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, he has gone to free from sorrow the captives Adam and Eve, He who is both God and the Son of Eve. The Lord approached them bearing the Cross, the weapon that had won him the victory. At the sight of him Adam, the first man he had created, struck his breast in terror and cried out to everyone, 'My Lord be with you all.' Christ answered him: 'And with your spirit.' He

took him by the hand and raised him up, saying: 'Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.'

I am your God, who for your sake have become your son. Out of love for you and your descendants I now by my own authority command all who are held in bondage to come forth, all who are in darkness to be enlightened, all who are sleeping to arise. I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be held a prisoner in Hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead. Rise up, work of my hands, you who were created in my image. Rise, let us leave this place, for you are in me and I in you; together we form one person and cannot be separated.

For your sake I, your God, became your son; I, the Lord, took the form of a slave; I, whose home is above the heavens, descended to the earth and beneath the earth...on my back see the marks of the scourging I endured to remove the burden of sin that weighs upon your back. See my hands, nailed firmly to a tree, for you who once wickedly stretched out your hand to a tree.

I slept on the Cross and a sword pierced my side for you who slept in Paradise and brought forth Eve from your side. My side has healed the pain in yours. My sleep will rouse you from your sleep in Hell. The sword that pierced Me has sheathed the sword that was turned against you. Rise, let us leave this place... The Kingdom of Heaven has been prepared for you from all eternity. ⁱⁱ

In this imagining of Christ's descent into hell, we see that through his cross Jesus literally crushed spiritual death, proved his victory over death by plundering the pit holding the souls who were waiting for him, and recovering those who were always his. In his suffering Jesus *redeemed* us, bought us back from the enslavement of the evil one at the cost of his own life. What a precious reminder, as we approach Good Friday, that God's saving work is so complete that not a single square inch of anything can ever escape his power, including hell itself.

So, my invitation to you, as I send you off into the wilds of this fifth week of Lent, is to wonder about the ways in which your suffering, too, can become *redemptive*. How can you offer your suffering, through concrete means or through prayer and intercession, so that it works to free someone else? And how might it change our relationship to our suffering if we understood that it has the power to release someone from whatever hell they are trapped in?

I'll close now with a passage from the Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris*, on the Christian meaning of human suffering, written by Pope John Paul II:

In the mystery of the Church as his Body, Christ has in a sense opened his own redemptive suffering to all human suffering. In so far as man becomes a sharer in Christ's sufferings—in any part of the world and at any time in history—to that extent he in his own way completes the suffering through which Christ accomplished the Redemption of the world...Yes, it seems to be part of the very essence of Christ's redemptive suffering that this suffering requires to be unceasingly completed.

Thank you for listening to the Lenten Meditations. May the time you spend side by side with the suffering Christ this Lent bring you ever closer to his beautiful heart. Amen.

ⁱ See also Matthew 12:40, Matthew 27:50–54, Acts 2:24, Acts 2:31, Ephesians 4:9, Colossians 1:18, 1 Peter 3:18–19, 1 Peter 4:6

ⁱⁱ To read the full text, see: <https://www.liturgies.net/Liturgies/Catholic/loh/lent/holysaturdayor.htm>