

Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

Jonathan Edwards

BACKGROUND Jonathan Edwards delivered his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” in 1741 to a congregation in Enfield, Connecticut. Edwards read the sermon, as he always did, in a composed style, with few gestures or movements. However, the sermon had a dramatic effect on his parishioners, many of whom wept and moaned. Some even considered suicide.

ANALYZE VISUALS

This painting by Italian artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo presents an allegory of fire. What lesson or message does the painting seem to suggest about the meaning of fire?

We find it easy to tread on and crush a worm that we see crawling on the earth; so it is easy for us to cut or singe a slender thread that any thing hangs by; thus easy is it for God when he pleases to cast his enemies down to hell. . . .

They¹ are now the objects of that very same *anger* and wrath of God, that is expressed in the torments of hell. And the reason why they do not go down to hell at each moment, is not because God, in whose power they are, is not then very angry with them; as angry as he is with many miserable creatures now tormented in hell, who there feel and bear the fierceness of his wrath. Yea, God is a great deal more angry with great numbers that are now on earth; yea, doubtless, with many
10 that are now in this congregation, who it may be are at ease, than he is with many of those who are now in the flames of hell. **A**

A SERMON

Reread lines 8–11. Notice that Edwards directly addresses his audience in these lines. How do you imagine the audience responded to these words?

1. they: Earlier in the sermon, Edwards refers to all “unconverted men,” whom he considers God’s enemies. Unconverted men are people who have not been “born again,” meaning that they have not accepted Jesus Christ.

Fire, allegory (1566), Giuseppe Arcimboldo. Painted for Emperor Maximilian II. Limewood, 66.5 cm × 51 cm. Inv. 1585. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

So that it is not because God is unmindful of their wickedness, and does not resent it, that he does not let loose his hand and cut them off. God is not altogether such an one as themselves, though they may imagine him to be so. The wrath of God burns against them, their damnation does not slumber; the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them; the flames do now rage and glow. The glittering sword is whet, and held over them, and the pit hath opened its mouth under them. . . . **B**

Unconverted men walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering, and there are innumerable places in this covering so weak that they will not bear their weight, and these places are not seen. The arrows of death fly unseen at noonday; the sharpest sight cannot discern them. God has so many different unsearchable ways of taking wicked men out of the world and sending them to hell, that there is nothing to make it appear, that God had need to be at the expense of a miracle, or go out of the ordinary course of his providence, to destroy any wicked man, at any moment. . . .

So that, thus it is that natural men² are held in the hand of God, over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked, his anger is as great towards them as to those that are actually suffering the executions of the fierceness of his wrath in hell; and they have done nothing in the least to appease or abate that anger, neither is God in the least bound by any promise to hold them up one moment; the devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them, and would fain³ lay hold on them, and swallow them up; the fire pent up in their own hearts is struggling to break out: and they have no interest in any Mediator,⁴ there are no means within reach that can be any security to them. In short, they have no refuge, nothing to take hold of. . . . **C**

The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood. Thus all you that never passed under a great change of heart, by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls; all you that were never born again, and made new creatures, and raised from being dead in sin, to a state of new, and before altogether unexperienced light and life, are in the hands of an angry God. However you may have reformed your life in many things, and may have had religious affections, and may keep up a form of religion in your families and closets,⁵ and in the house of God, it is nothing but his mere pleasure that keeps you from being this moment swallowed up in everlasting destruction. . . . **D**

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his

whet (hwĕt) *adj.*
sharpened whet *v.*

B EMOTIONAL APPEALS

Reread lines 14–18. What imagery does Edwards use to appeal to fear in these lines?

discern (dĭ-sŭrn') *v.* to perceive or recognize something

appease (ə-pĕz') *v.* to bring peace, quiet, or calm to; to soothe

C EMOTIONAL APPEALS

Loaded language, or words with strong emotional associations, can be used to influence an audience's attitude. What examples of loaded language do you see in lines 27–30?

D SERMON

Note that Edwards reveals the purpose of his sermon in lines 42–46. Why is he delivering this sermon?

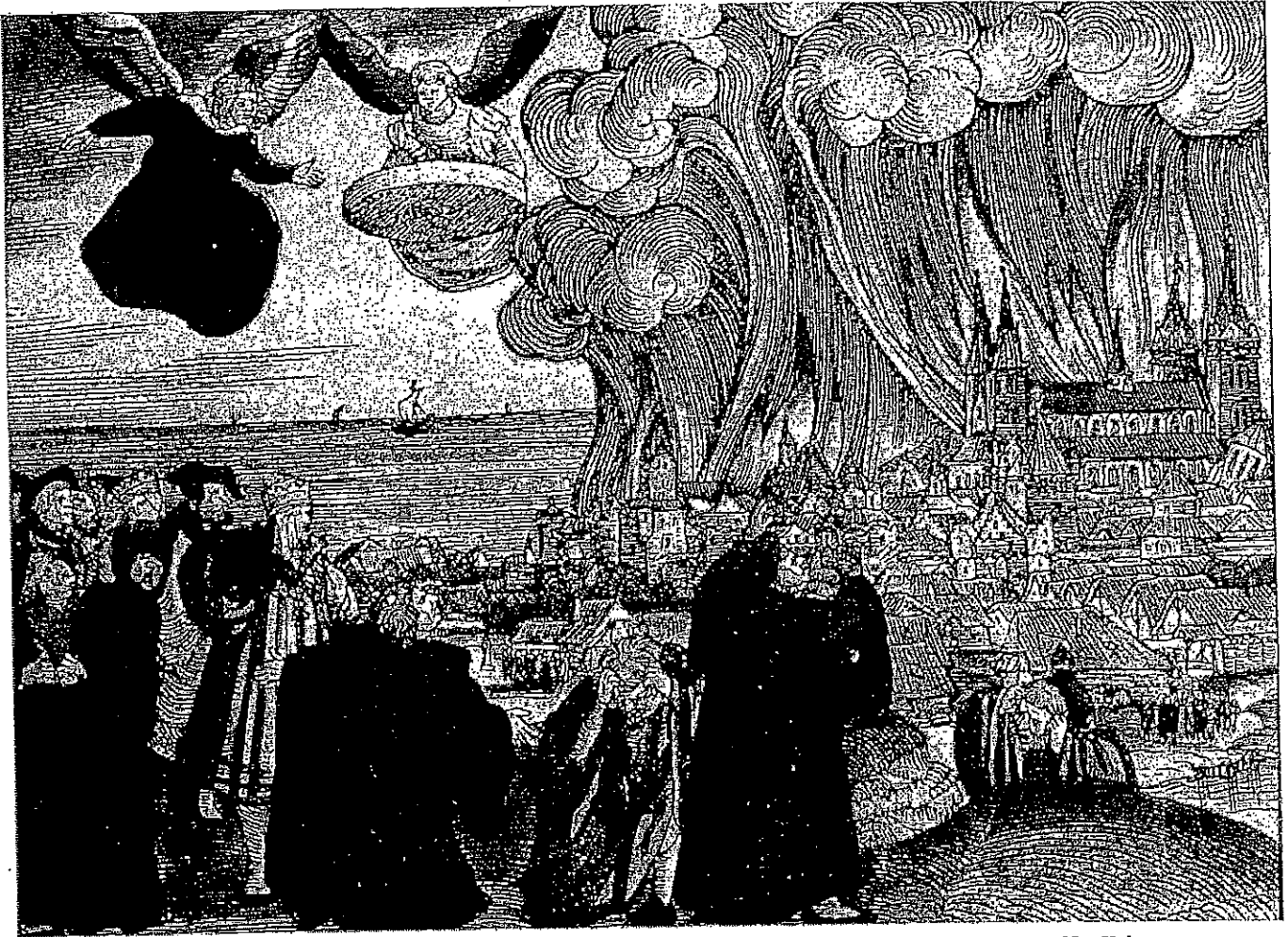
abhor (ăb-hŏr') *v.* to regard with disgust

2. natural men: people who have not been born again.

3. would fain: would rather.

4. Mediator: Jesus Christ, who mediates, or is the means of bringing about, salvation.

5. closets: private rooms for meditation.



Babylon Burning. From the *Apocalypse of Saint John* (Revelations 18). Luther Bible, First Edition, 1530. Private collection. Photo © Art Resource, New York.

wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night; that you was suffered⁶ to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship.

abominable
(ə-bŏm'ə-nə-bəl) *adj.*
thoroughly detestable

ascribe (ə-skrīb') *v.* to
attribute to a specified
cause or source

6. you was suffered: you were permitted.

Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell. **E**

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the
70 flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder;⁷ and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment. . . .

It is *everlasting* wrath. It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite⁸ horrible misery. When you look forward, you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your

E EMOTIONAL APPEALS

Notice the use of the simile, or comparison, in lines 50–65. In what way does comparing the audience to a spider appeal to both fear and vanity?

incense (ˈɪn-sɛns) v. to cause to be extremely angry

induce (ˈɪn-dooz) v. to succeed in persuading someone to do something

7. burn it asunder (ə-sūnˈdər): burn it into separate parts or pieces.

8. exquisite (əkˈskwɪ-zɪt): intensely felt.



Detail of *Hell*, Hendrik met de Bles, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having
80 any **deliverance**, any end, any **mitigation**, any rest at all. You will know certainly
that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and
conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance; and then when you have so
done, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will
know that all is but a point to what remains. So that your punishment will indeed
be infinite. Oh, who can express what the state of a soul in such circumstances is!
All that we can possibly say about it, gives but a very feeble, faint representation
of it; it is inexpressible and inconceivable: For “who knows the power of God’s
anger?”⁹

How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in the danger of
90 this great wrath and infinite misery! But this is the dismal case of every soul in this
congregation that has not been born again, however moral and strict, sober and
religious, they may otherwise be. . . . **F**

And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has
thrown the door of mercy wide open, and stands in the door calling and crying
with a loud voice to poor sinners; a day wherein many are flocking to him, and
pressing into the kingdom of God. Many are daily coming¹⁰ from the east, west,
north, and south; many that were very lately in the same miserable condition that
you are in, are now in a happy state, with their hearts filled with love to him who
has loved them, and washed them from their sins in his own blood, and rejoicing
100 in hope of the glory of God. How awful is it to be left behind at such a day! To
see so many others feasting, while you are pining and perishing! To see so many
rejoicing and singing for joy of heart, while you have cause to mourn for sorrow
of heart, and howl for vexation of spirit! How can you rest one moment in such a
condition? . . . **G**

Therefore, let every one that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath
to come. . . . **Ω**

deliverance (dĭ-lĭv'ər-əns)
n. rescue from danger

mitigation (mĭt-ĭ-gā'shən)
n. lessening of something
that causes suffering

F SERMON

Keep in mind that Edwards delivers his sermon in the context of his own time and place. In lines 90–92, in what way does he acknowledge the Puritan heritage of his listeners?

G EMOTIONAL APPEALS

Reread lines 93–104 and note the change in tone. How might the change in tone appeal to the audience’s pity and vanity?

9. “who knows . . . anger?": an allusion to Psalm 90:11 in the Bible—“Who knoweth the power of thine anger?”

10. Many . . . coming: a reference to the hundreds of people who were being converted during the Great Awakening.