

from

Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God



Jonathan Edwards

So that, thus it is that natural men¹ 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 toward 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 abate² 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, **1** and would fain³ lay hold on them, and swallow them up; the fire pent up in

1 Note how Edwards uses parallelism in these lines: "The devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them."

? How does the parallel structure build a sense of horror?

1. **natural men:** people who have not been "reborn."
2. **abate** *v.*: reduce in amount or intensity.
3. **fain** *adv.*: archaic word meaning "happily" or "gladly."

Vocabulary

provoked (prə·vōkt') *v.* used as *adj.*: angered.

appease (ə·pēz') *v.*: calm; satisfy.

The Progress of Sin (detail) (1744) by Benjamin Keach.

Sinclair Hamilton Collection. Department of Rare Books and Special Collections. Princeton University Library.

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; all that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and uncovenanted, unobliged forbearance⁵ of an incensed⁶ God.

The use of this awful subject may be for awakening unconverted persons in this congregation. This that you have heard is the case of every one of you that are out of Christ. ² That

world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone, is extended abroad under you. There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell's wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor anything to take hold of; there is nothing between you and hell but the air; it is only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up.

You probably are not sensible of this; you find you are kept out of hell, but do not see the hand of God in it; but look at other things, as the good state of your bodily constitution, your care of your own life, and the means you use for your own preservation. But indeed these things are nothing; if God should withdraw His hand, they would avail no more to keep you from falling, than the thin air to hold up a person that is suspended in it.

Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downward with great weight and pressure toward hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness, would

4. **Mediator:** Jesus Christ. In general, one who intervenes between two parties in conflict.

5. **forbearance** *n.*: tolerance or restraint.

6. **incensed** *v.* used as *adj.*: angered; enraged.

² **?** Whom does Edwards address in his sermon, and what does he hope it will accomplish?

have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a fallen rock. . . . ³

The wrath of God is like great waters that are dammed for the present; they increase more and more, and rise higher and higher, till an outlet is given; and the longer the

stream is stopped, the more rapid and mighty is its course, when once it is let loose. It is true, that judgment against your evil works has not been executed hitherto; the floods of God's vengeance have been withheld; but your guilt in the meantime is constantly increasing, and you are every day treasuring up more wrath; the waters are constantly rising, and waxing more and more mighty; and there is nothing but the mere pleasure of God that holds the waters back, that are unwilling to be stopped, and press hard to go forward. If God should only withdraw His hand from the floodgate, it would immediately fly open, and the fiery floods of the fierceness and wrath of God, would rush forth with inconceivable fury, and would come upon you with omnipotent power; and if your strength were ten thousand times greater than it is, yea, ten thousand times greater than the strength of the stoutest, sturdiest devil in hell; it would be nothing to withstand or endure it.

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

Vocabulary

constitution (kän'stə·tōō'shən) *n.*: physical condition.

contrivance (kən·tri'vəns) *n.*: scheme; plan.

inconceivable (in'kən·sēv'ə·bəl) *adj.*: unimaginable; beyond understanding.

omnipotent (äm·nip'ə·tənt) *adj.*: all-powerful.

³ Edwards uses a **metaphor** here to dramatize human powerlessness: People who think they can escape Hell on their own have as little chance of doing so as a spider's web has of stopping a falling rock.

with your blood. ④ 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,⁷ and may keep up a form of religion in your families and closets,⁸ 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. However unconvinced you may now be of the truth of what you hear, by and by you will be fully convinced of it. ⑤ Those that are gone from being in the like circumstances with you, see that it was so with them; for destruction came suddenly upon most of them; when they expected nothing of it, and while they were saying, peace and safety: Now they see, that those things on which they depended for peace and safety, were nothing but thin air and empty shadows.

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 wrath toward 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. ⑥ You have offended Him infinitely more than

7. **affections** *n. pl.*: feelings.

8. **closets** *n. pl.*: rooms for prayer and meditation.

④ Edwards uses a **metaphor** to describe God's wrath. Explain this metaphor in your own words.

⑤ What main point does Edwards want his listeners to understand? Who or what does he say will convince them?

⑥ What two creatures does Edwards compare sinners to in this passage?

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 were suffered 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. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell. ⑦

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 flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder;⁹ 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. . . . ⑧

⑦ Here Edwards repeats one of his **main ideas**: that the only reason his listeners have not fallen into the fires of Hell is that God has held them up.

⑧ How does Edwards use **repetition** to increase the emotional effect of his sermon?

9. **asunder** *adv.*: into pieces.

Vocabulary

abhors (ab·hōrz') *v.*: scorns; hates.

abominable (ə·bām'ə·nə·bəl) *adj.*: disgusting; loathsome.

ascribed (ə·skrībd') *v.*: regarded as coming from a certain cause.

induce (in·dōōs') *v.*: persuade; force; cause.

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 exquisite horrible misery. When you look forward, you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having 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 wresting 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

⑨ What details in Edwards’s description help his listeners understand the concept of eternity?

How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in the danger of 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. Oh, that you would consider it, whether you be young or old! There is reason to think, that there are many in this congregation now hearing this discourse that will actually be the subjects of this very misery to all eternity. We know not who they are, or in what seats they sit, or what thoughts they now have. It may be they are now at ease, and hear



all these things without much disturbance, and are now flattering themselves that they are not the persons, promising themselves that they shall escape. If we knew that there was one person, and but one, in the whole congregation that was to be the subject of this misery, what an awful thing would it be to think of! If we knew who it was, what an awful sight would it be to see such a person! How might all the rest of the congregation lift up a lamentable and bitter cry over him! But, alas! Instead of one, how many is it likely will remember this discourse in hell? And it would be a wonder if some that are now present should not be in hell in a very short time, even before this year is out. And it would be no wonder if some persons that now sit here, in some seats of this meetinghouse, in health, quiet, and secure, should be there before tomorrow morning. Those of you that finally continue in a natural condition, that shall keep out of hell longest, will be there in a little time! Your damnation does not slumber; it will come swiftly and, in all probability, very suddenly upon many of you. You have reason to wonder that you are not already in hell. It is doubtless the case of some whom you have seen and known that never deserved hell more than you, and that heretofore appeared as likely to have been now alive as you. Their case is past all hope; they are crying in extreme misery and perfect despair. But here you are in the land of the living and in the house of God, and have an opportunity to obtain salvation. What would not those poor damned hopeless souls give for one day's opportunity such as you now enjoy!

And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open, and stands in 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 coming 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 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? . . . ⑩

⑩
? What comparison does Edwards make between those who have accepted Christ's love and those who have not?

Therefore, let everyone that is out of Christ now awake and fly from the wrath to come. The wrath of Almighty God is now undoubtedly hanging over a great part of this congregation: let everyone fly out of Sodom.¹⁰ "Haste and escape for your lives, look not behind you, escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed."¹¹

10. **Sodom:** in the Bible, a city so wicked that God destroyed it, sparing only one man, Lot, and his family.
11. **"Haste and escape . . . lest you be consumed":** from Genesis 19:17, the words spoken by an angel of God to Lot, warning him to flee Sodom and never look back.