

Jonathan Edwards

from Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

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. 'Tis true that judgment against your evil work 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 continually 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 with your blood.

Thus are all you that never passed under a great change of heart by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls; all 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 (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 and in the house of God, and

may be strict in it), you are thus in the hands of an angry God; 'tis 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. 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 that they depended on 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 so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful and 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. 'Tis 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 don't this very moment drop down into hell.

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in. 'Tis 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; 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. . . . □□

Discussion

1. Edwards develops three **extended metaphors** to create the image of an angry God condemning sinners to suffer forever. Identify the extended metaphors in the selection, as well as the individual figures of speech that develop them.

2. Edwards's sermons were powerful to the congregations and readers of his time. (a) What can you deduce about the religious convictions of the average member of his congregation? (b) How effective do you think his sermons would be today? Explain your answer.

3. (a) Why do you think Edwards chose to portray a God of wrath instead of a loving God? (b) Which image lends itself to a more vivid sermon, and why?

Extension • Reading

Read the definitions of **simile** and **metaphor** in the Definitions of Literary Terms. Then read another famous sermon such as the Sermon on the Mount or Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream." In a paragraph discuss the similarities and differences in the use of figurative language between that sermon and "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

Vocabulary • Dictionary

Use your Glossary to answer the questions about each italicized word below. The words are taken from the selections by William Bradford, Anne Bradstreet, and Jonathan Edwards.

1. In Bradford's "The History of Plymouth Plantation," the man who cursed and swore at the other passengers on the ship became ill and died. How was this an example of God's *providence*?

2. During the fire in "Upon the Burning of Our House," Bradstreet says that she was awakened by "*piteous* shrieks." What other words could describe these shrieks?

The rest of the questions deal with words in Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

3. Edwards characterizes God as *omnipotent*. What does he mean?

4. Man is compared to a "*loathsome* insect." What kind of insect is this?

5. What characteristics of humanity does Edwards find *abominable*?

6. Edwards says his listeners are hanging by a thread over the fires of eternal punishment. What will happen when this thread comes *asunder*?



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Edwards is probably the most eminent theologian that America has yet produced. He was born in Connecticut and educated at Yale. During his early career as minister in the church at Northampton, Massachusetts, he encouraged the Great Awakening, the first of a series of religious revivals in America. His congregation became uneasy when he began to place emphasis on public accounts of religious experiences, and dismissed him in 1750. He went then to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where he served as minister from 1751 to 1757. Among the important religious works by Edwards are *A Divine and Supernatural Light* (1734) and *Freedom of the Will* (1754).