

# Sinners in the hands of an angry god

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Jonathan Edwards's sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" delivers the dogma that only the mercy of God can save one from being condemned to Hell. Edwards appealed to his followers' fear as a way of guiding his flock towards what he saw as the correct principles of Christian faith; the intensely terrifying metaphors of the sermon were his trademark. He bases his sermon from Deuteronomy 32: 35 "Their foot shall slide in due time" (NAAL 425), which equates in layman terms as "give them enough rope and they will hang themselves." The quote suggests the idea of a spiral into Hell, setting the mood for the dark sermon to come. "In due time" implies that impending damnation is not only imminent but assured as well. "There is nothing that keeps wicked men, at any moment, out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God" (NAAL 426) is the mission statement that Edwards reiterates throughout his sermon. His "considerations" are attempts to justify his doctrine through a combined use of observations and hellish imagery and to illustrate the supremacy of God. Edwards makes his opinion of God's enemies clear; "They are as great heaps of light chaff before the whirlwind; or large quantities of dry stubble before devouring flames" (NAAL 426). Chaff and dry stubble are both highly combustible dry plant material, or fuel for a fire. They will both go up in smoke easily without a threat of dampening the power of God. Edwards leaves little doubt in the minds of his parishioners that the devil wants them, and that God is the only thing keeping them safe. "They (devils) stand waiting for them, like greedy hungry lions that see their prey, and expect to have it, but are at present kept back" (NAAL 427) brings up a mental image of being dangled like bait. In Edwards's sermon we are all rife with sin, whether know it or not. Ignorance is no more an excuse in the

divine courts than it is in secular ones, and it does not make one safe from danger. God will send a natural or unconverted man to Hell as quick as a wicked soul. “ Unconverted men walk over a pit of Hell on a rotten covering, and there are innumerable places in this covering so weak that they won’t bear their weight, and these places are not seen” (NAAL 428). He illustrates the hopelessness of a secular life with, “ Misery, that lake of burning brimstone is extended abroad under you. There is a dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; you have nothing to stand upon” (NAAL 430). He seems to be pushing his followers farther and farther to the edge of a great precipice so they can see there is nowhere to go but God. The strength of human will is shown as weak and useless, “ Your righteousness, would have no more influence to uphold and keep you out of Hell, than a spider’s web would have to stop a falling rock” (NAAL 430). A rock of course would fall right through a web with no resistance, as would we into Hell without the hand of God to hold us up. One of Edward’s recurrent themes is to compare God’s wrath to natural disasters; he compares God with fierce storms, winds, and waters that are at the ready to wash away the unrighteous. Metaphors like “ there are the black clouds of God’s wrath now hanging over your heads, full of the dreadful storm, and big with thunder” and “ the wrath of God is like great waters that are damned for the present” (NAAL 430 ) show just how little man is in comparison to God’s fury. God’s judgment and wrath are shown to be at the ready, “ the bow of God’s arrow is bent and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart” (NAAL 431). It paints a picture of ‘ repent or die’, like a divine firing squad is waiting for the go to fire upon the sinners. There is no room to

bargain when the Lord's hand is on the trigger for his ruling is swift and harsh. It is evident that Edwards held humankind in the lowest regard. He portrays man as an insignificant bug that is lucky to not be squashed under God's thumb. He refers to man as "...a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, (God) abhors you" (NAAL 431). Class and station do not affect the Lord's view of man, Edwards refers to royalty as " feeble, despicable worms of the dust" (NAAL 432). Jonathan Edwards hoped that the imagery and message of his sermon would awaken his audience to the reality of their predestination to Hell. For all the damnation he warns, there is a ray of light. Though it is God's will that keeps man from the depths of Hell; humanity has a chance to change their ways and return to Him. " Therefore let everyone that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come" (NAAL 436). Edwards indirectly gives a sense of hope to those currently out of Christ. Only by returning to Christ can one escape the stark fate of the unsaved.

Norton's Anthology of American Literature