

A merciful god from violent imagery



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In 1742, Jonathan Edwards undertook the task of crafting a sermon that would be powerful in the eyes of both believers and unbelievers. The result exists today as his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." The sermon differs from traditional sermons both of his time and in modern times. Rather than depicting the merciful and loving God of the Christian faith, Edwards brings to light a wrathful and angry God. He takes a look into the human condition while justifying the wrath of God. However, this is not the image of God that one is intended to take away from this message. While the language and imagery of the sermon were intended to cause feelings of hopelessness and fear, these are not the emotions that Edwards intended his audience to leave with. In his sermon, Edwards identifies the human condition and man's depravity while justifying the building wrath of God only to use such harsh and violent imagery to paint a picture of a merciful and just God.

Edwards uses oversimplification and imagery to establish the human situation and man's depravity. His first set of points establishes the dire situation of all human beings. He establishes a world where the possibility of destruction is ever-present and where a man "that stands on such slippery declining ground, on that edge of a pit, he cannot stand alone, when he is let go he immediately falls and is lost" (Edwards 430). He sees the human race on the brink of destruction with no power within to prevent such ruin. He furthers this by speaking about human nature: "There are in the souls of wicked men those hellish principles reigning that would presently kindle and flame out into hell fire, if it were not for God's restraints" (Edwards 432). Men are not simply in constant danger of destruction; they are in danger of

destruction at their own hands. Humans are by their nature corrupt and even self-destructive. He goes on to comment on God's role in this situation: "...if God should leave it without restraints, there would need nothing else to make the soul perfectly miserable... it would immediately turn the soul into a fiery oven, or a furnace of fire and brimstone" (Edwards 432). This transformation of the soul echoes the imagery of hell. " Edwards thought of himself as a spokesman of God's threat of terrible punishment to the unregenerate sinner... frequently [using] imagery that calls upon such violent and destructive events as would activate the pain receptors" (Steele and Delay 250). He is using this type of imagery to appeal to his audience's senses in order to horrify them of the darkness of their hearts and the reality of the place devoted to such degradation. Hell is supposed to be a place of fire and eternal torment and pain for the souls of unbelievers. With this overlap of imagery, Edwards seems to be suggesting that hell is simply a manifestation of unrestrained human nature. It is a place where the hand of God does not hold men back from their destructive tendencies and the result is a place of eternal misery. " Hell is what every day would be if it were not God's continuing mercy" (Adams and Yarbrough 30). However, the blame resides on humans themselves rather than God because hell is not simply a place that God has created to punish them. It is the manifestation of their nature and sin from which the hand of God has attempted to save them.

After setting the scene and revealing the darkness of human nature, Edwards establishes both man's ability to anger of God and his futility against the immeasurable and eternal power of God. Edwards moves from an attack on human nature to an attack on human intelligence. He claims, "

Unconverted men walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering” (Edwards 433). He is claiming that men without God walk the earth and remain ignorant of the possibility of death and destruction that is ever-present. In fact, any man aware of hell “ finds that [he is] kept out of hell, but [does] not see the hand of God in it; but looks at other things” (Edwards 434). He reveals unbelievers to be ignorant of their circumstances with a false sense of security found in their own intelligence. Human ignorance in regards to the human situation and the means by which everyone is kept from destruction is the reason for God’s anger. Edwards claims, “...the sun does not willingly shine upon you to give you light to serve sin and Satan” (Edwards 435). He uses natural imagery because nature is the creation of God and is intended for the benefit of men, and yet men use it simply to further their sinful nature in opposition to God. This is the justification of God’s wrath against the human race. Human ignorance extends to the power of God, which is to be feared: “...fear him, which after he hath killed, hath power to cast into hell” (Edwards 437). Depraved and ignorant beings have no standing against such power. Humans are without the means to abstain from sin and Satan, the enemy of God. Such opposition can only be met with anger and the ultimate punishment from an all-powerful God.

Edwards offers hope in the end by stating the anger of God is only to come and that he is currently ready to pity and have mercy on depraved human beings. He has established the dire situation in which all humans find themselves and has justified God’s anger against such depraved creatures. In the end of his sermon, Edwards changes the mood of the sermon slightly in stating, “ And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein

Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open” (Edwards 440). This statement reveals that the impending wrath of God is still in the future and that the angry God described in the sermon is still open to reconciliation and offering mercy at the current moment. With the emergence of this hopeful point, Edwards changes the meaning of the harsh imagery and descriptions used in the earlier portion of the sermon. The emphasis on the justified anger of the almighty God and the impending demise of all unbelievers serves as a foil to highlight the mercifulness of God. This makes the message’s impact twofold. In the words of John Adams and Stephen Yarbrough, “...saintly auditors will identify with the hand of God. They may shriek with joy. Grounded in assurance, saints are able to discern the awesome beauty of God’s justice...” (Adams and Yarbrough 32). To believers, the dire situation of humans and the merciful God that keeps them from such destruction is a reason to praise and rejoice. To the unbeliever, the sermon strips away the complications and reveals their desperate situation. It also reveals to them the wrath they will be subject to while offering hope and a way to circumvent such demise. Therefore, the image taken from the sermon does not have to be that of a vengeful God that seeks only to destroy people. The image that Edwards, as a believer, would have taken from this message is the depraved nature of human beings and the merciful and just God that saves such beings from self-destruction and eternal damnation. His main goal was to convert his audience. Therefore, this image is the one that Edwards would have wanted his audience to remember and hold on to; he would have wanted them to live in awe and praise of such a merciful God rather than in fear of such anger and wrath.

From the perspective of this sermon, God is not simply an angry force that is hungry for punishment. He is trying to save the human race from self-destruction and, for all his efforts, is ignored and abandoned by his people for his enemy. He owes such people nothing and yet has mercy enough to hold them from destruction on a daily basis. His anger is against human ignorance and defiance and will only be enacted upon those who remain in such a state. Edwards carefully crafted this message to apply to both believers and unbelievers in his audience. As he reveals the helpless situation that people are in with their own depravity and destructive nature, both groups of people would have been humbled and aware of their own inadequacy. As he then moves on to justify God's anger against humanity, unbelievers would have the image of a vengeful and angry God while believers would see the merciful God that holds back such rightful anger. Edwards is simply painting a violent picture in order to highlight the mercifulness of God and the evil that resides within human nature. The violence is simply a foil to highlight the mercy of God, who holds his people back from themselves and prevents immediate destruction that is imminent according to the depraved state of human nature. Therefore, the image to take away is not one of sinners at the mercy of a violent God. The takeaway is intended to be the image of a God with the capacity for such immense and justifiable anger that holds back such wrath in mercy. However, as Edwards points out, this anger will not be held back indefinitely and his mercy extends for a certain amount of time. The angry God in the title is the God to come while the merciful God is the God that exists for humans in their lifetime.

Works Cited

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