Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758)

Author of “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”

The sermons of Jonathan Edwards were so filled with “fire and brimstone”—a phrase symbolizing the torments of hell endured by sinners—that his name alone was enough to make many eighteenth-century Puritans shudder in their shoes. Yet, Edwards was not just a stone-faced religious zealot. He was also a man who believed in science and reason and who saw in the physical world the proof of God’s presence and will.

A Born Preacher This great American theologian was born in East Windsor, Connecticut, where he grew up in an atmosphere of devout discipline. As a young boy, he is said to have demonstrated his religious devotion by preaching sermons to his playmates. He also displayed academic brilliance, learning to speak Latin, Greek, and Hebrew before he was twelve. Edwards entered the College of Connecticut (now Yale University) at the age of thirteen and graduated four years later as a valedictorian. He went on to earn his master’s degree in theology.

The Great Awakening Edwards began his preaching career in 1722 as assistant to his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard. Stoddard was pastor of the church at Northampton, Massachusetts, one of the largest and wealthiest Puritan congregations. Edwards became the church pastor two years later when his grandfather died. Committed to a return to the orthodoxy and fervent faith of the Puritan past, Edwards became one of the leaders of the Great Awakening, a religious revival that swept the colonies in the 1730s and 1740s.

Fall from Favor As pastor of the church at Northampton, Edwards had instituted disciplinary proceedings against members of his congregation for reading what he considered improper books. In his sermons he denounced by name those he considered sinners. Such actions drew criticism and, in 1750, a council representing ten congregations dismissed Edwards as pastor.

After his dismissal, Edwards moved to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where he preached to the Native Americans and wrote his most important theological works. He continued to preach and write until his death in 1758, shortly after becoming president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). Although in most of his writings Edwards appeals to reason, his emotional sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is by far his most famous work. It demonstrates Edwards’s tremendous powers of persuasion and captures the religious fervor of the Great Awakening.
from Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God
Jonathan Edwards

BACKGROUND Jonathan Edwards delivered this famous sermon to a congregation in Enfield, Connecticut, in 1741. Surprisingly, he spoke quietly and without emotion. According to one account, he read the six-hour work in a level voice, staring over the heads of his audience at the bell rope that hung against the back wall "as if he would stare it in two." Despite his calm manner, his listeners are said to have screamed in terror, and Edwards had to stop several times to ask for silence.

This is the case of every one of you that are out of Christ:1 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.

1. out of Christ not in God's grace.
The American Experience

Biblical Imagery

Jonathan Edwards’s frightening imagery of God’s potential for wrath and destruction recalls stories of fires, floods, and divine retribution in the Old Testament of the King James Bible. While the imagery thrilled Edwards’s audience, they would have found it quite familiar. In fact, in 1741, when Edwards delivered this sermon, the King James Bible had been in wide circulation for 130 years. The first English version of the Bible to include both the Old and New Testaments, the King James Bible had been produced at the express request of the Puritans in England in 1611. This Bible, with its haunting language and powerful imagery, would have been common daily reading for most of Edwards’s listeners.

Connect to the Literature

How do you think a contemporary audience of worshippers would react to the terms “fire and brimstone” biblical imagery?

Vocabulary

**Oppositions**

mediator (mediator) n. one who reconciles opposing groups

induce (induce) v. cause; bring about

**Words**

omnipotent (omnipotence) adj. all-powerful

discern (discern) v. notice, understand

**Scripture**

2. stays (stile) v. restrains.

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, 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.

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 scurrying insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his 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 in ours. . . .

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 strike 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. . . .

When God beholds the ineffable extremity of your case, and sees your torment to be so vastly disproportioned to your strength, and sees how your poor soul is crushed, and sinks down, as it were, into an infinite gulf; he will have no compassion upon you, he will not forbear the executions of his wrath, or in the least lighten his hand; there shall be no moderation or mercy, nor will God then at all stay his wrath; he will have no regard to your welfare, nor be at all careful lest you should suffer too much in any other sense, than only that you shall not suffer beyond what strict justice requires. . . .

God stands ready to pity you; this is a day of mercy; you may cry now with some encouragement of obtaining mercy. But once the day of mercy is past, your most lamentable and dolorous cries and shrieks

---

3. ocellata adj. small, private rooms for meditation.
4. ineffable (in & b) adj. inexpressible.
5. dolorous (old & w) adj. cast mourning.

Comprehension

According to Edwards, what is “but thin air and empty shadows”??
Using Context Clues

What clue does the reference to “forever” provide to the meaning of boundless?

Critical Reading

1. Key Ideas and Details (a) According to the opening paragraph, what keeps sinners from falling into hell? (b) Interpret: According to Edwards, what do his listeners mistakenly feel keeps them from falling into hell?

2. Key Ideas and Details (a) What words in the sermon’s title suggest the emotional focus of Edwards’s message? (b) Analyze: What additional traits does Edwards attribute to God as the sermon progresses?

3. Key Ideas and Details (a) Toward the end of the sermon, what does Edwards say sinners can obtain? (b) Analyze Cause and Effect: What must sinners do to obtain these things?

4. Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Given his purpose and the audience of worshipers to whom he spoke, do you think Edwards’s sermon was effective? Why or why not?

5. Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: This sermon played a significant role in reinvigorating Puritan faith during the 1740s. Why? State your opinion, using at least two of these Essential Question words: powerful, beliefs, doctrine, faithful. (Connecting to the Essential Question: How does literature shape or reflect society?)

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 grieving and perishing! To see so many rejoicing and singing for joy of heart, while you have cause to mourn for sorrow of heart, and how forgers of spirit! . . .

Therefore, let everyone that is out of Christ now awake and fly from the wrathes of the Almighty God is now doubtfully hanging over a great part of this congregation: let everyone fly out of Sodom. “Haste and escape for your lives, look not behind you, escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed.”

1. Sodom (pol. en). In the Bible, a city destroyed by fire because of the sinfulness of its people.
2. “Haste . . . consumed”: from Genesis 19:17, the angels’ warning to Lot, the only virtuous man in Sodom, to flee the city before they destroy it.

6. the Lamb Jesus.
Close Reading Activities

from Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

Literary Analysis

1. Key Ideas and Details: For each item below, use context clues to define the italicized words. Then, explain in your own words what each passage means.
   a. "You are every day treating up more wrath; the waters are constantly rising, and waying more and more mightily."
   b. "The God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a spider, or some such insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked."
   c. "and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all."

2. Key Ideas and Details (a) What message is Edwards conveying in this sermon? (b) Note two places where he directly states his purpose and message.

3. Craft and Structure: Explain how the purpose and message of Edwards's oratory are persuasive. What does he want his listeners to do or think?

4. Craft and Structure (a) What is the main emotional appeal Edwards uses in his effort to move his congregation? (b) Considering Edwards's purpose, why is this an appropriate choice? Explain your answer.

5. Craft and Structure (a) What does Edwards seem to feel about those who maintain a "form of religion" or who seem "moral and strict"? (b) How does this part of his message show that Edwards understands his audience well?

6. Craft and Structure (a) Choose two passages that you find very powerful. (b) Analyze the reasons for your choice: are you responding to the message itself, to the rhythmic and expressive language in which it is framed, or to both?

7. Craft and Structure: Why are images of the destructive power of nature appropriate to Edwards's message?

8. Integration of Knowledge and Ideas (a) Use a chart like the one shown to identify Biblical archetypes—images, patterns, characters, or stories—Edwards uses to describe God's wrath. (b) How does each archetype add to the power of Edwards's message?

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use

Word Analysis: Latin Prefix omni-

The Latin prefix omni- means "all" or "every." Each of the adjectives below contains the prefix omni-. Use the information in parentheses to match each adjective with the situation to which it best applies.

1. omniscient (sciences = knowing)
2. omnivorous (vor = to eat)
3. omnipresent (present = present)
   a. how a zoologist might describe an animal that eats both meat and plants
   b. how a student might describe a brilliant teacher
   c. how someone lost in the desert might describe the sun

Vocabulary: Analogies

Analogies show the relationship between pairs of words. Complete each analogy using a word from the vocabulary list on page 84. In each analogy, you should create a word pair that matches the relationship between the first two words given. Then, explain your answers.

1. Brilliant is to smart as ______ is to ______.
2. Soul is to spiritual as ______ is to ______.
3. Translator is to languages as ______ is to ______.
4. Argue is to reconcile as ______ is to prevent.
5. Loyalty is to faithless as ______ is to ______.

Writing to Sources

Argument: A speaker's choice of persuasive techniques should depend on the audience and the occasion. Write an evaluation of the persuasive techniques that Edwards uses. Discuss the response he evokes in the audience and the ways he achieves it.

Prewriting: To focus your writing, jot down examples of Edwards's uses of imagery, logical reasoning, and emotional appeals. Make sure all of your choices are relevant and provide sufficient support for your claims. Then, write one statement in which you evaluate their effectiveness in reaching an audience.

Drafting: Use the statement you wrote as the basis for a strong, focused opening paragraph. Support your main point in the paragraphs that follow.

Model: Building Unity

Jonathan Edwards appealed to his audience's vulnerability by using powerful, elemental images of nature ran amok. His images of air, water, and fire terrified his audience by summoning up mental pictures of unlimited natural destruction.

Revising: Read your evaluation as though you are seeing it for the first time. Eliminate any information that is unrelated to the main idea.