



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,  and would fain³ lay hold on them, and swallow them up; the fire pent up in

 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.

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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. ❷ 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.

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. . . . ❸

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

❸
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.

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

Vocabulary

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

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

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

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

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

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?

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

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

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·skribd') v.: regarded as coming from a certain cause.

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

Response and Analysis


Reading Check

1. Find the direct statement in which Edwards sets forth the **purpose** of his sermon.
2. According to the sermon, what keeps sinners out of the fiery "pit of hell"?
3. Identify the three famous **figures of speech** that Edwards develops in the fourth through seventh paragraphs. What things is he comparing in each one?

Thinking Critically

4. What references in the sermon reveal Edwards's implicit philosophical beliefs about divine mercy?
5. Edwards was directing his sermon to what he calls "natural men," those members of his congregation who had not been "reborn." What **images** and **figures of speech** might have helped Edwards's listeners to *feel* the peril of their sinful condition?
6. Edwards struck fear into the hearts of his listeners in order to persuade them to act to avoid everlasting torment. Which specific **metaphors** and **similes** in the sermon were probably the most persuasive?

Extending and Evaluating

7. If you had a chance to respond to Edwards, what would you say?
8. Edwards believed that fear was a great motivator, yet many philosophers and politicians have disagreed. For example, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in his first inaugural address, made this famous comment about fear: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." What do you think of the use of fear as a motivator? Before you answer, look back at your Quickwrite notes. What motivation might work better than fear? 

WRITING

The Tone of the Time

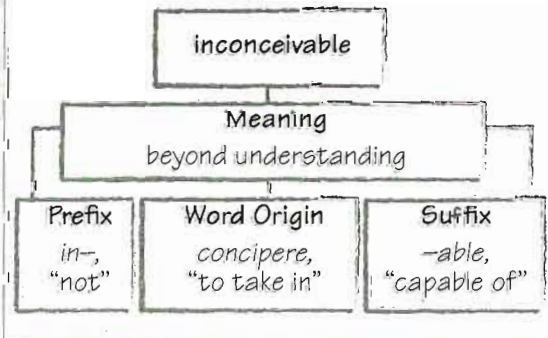
Edwards's fiery words were delivered to the congregation of a church he was visiting. What is Edwards's **tone**, or attitude toward his audience, and what effect does this attitude have on his listeners? Consider how Edwards's sermon would differ if he had chosen a different style or diction. Write a brief **essay** in which you analyze Edwards's tone and then consider what would happen if that tone were different. Would the sermon be as effective?

Vocabulary Development

Prefixes and Suffixes

provoked contrivance abominable
appease omnipotent ascribed
constitution abhors induce

Just a few letters tacked onto the beginning of a word (a **prefix**) or the end of a word (a **suffix**) can change its meaning and often its part of speech. When you find an unfamiliar word, look for prefixes and suffixes that provide clues to how the base form of the word changes. Keep in mind that *-s*, *-ed*, and *-ing* are inflectional suffixes (suffixes that indicate the tense or case of a word rather than changing its meaning). Fill out a chart like the one below for each remaining Vocabulary word. Consult a dictionary to find the origins of words and the meanings of prefixes and suffixes.



INTERNET

Projects and Activities

Keyword: LE5 11-1

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills
Analyze figures of speech.

Writing Skills
Write an essay analyzing tone.

Vocabulary Skills
Understand prefixes and suffixes.