

SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD

(A consideration of Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon)

Would you agree with me that we do a great disservice to God and the Gospel when we preach only the love of God? Yes, it is a most precious and wonderful gift that **God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son** ...but, are we being faithful to the message of His Word when we simply speak *only* upon the love of God?

I'll never forget that Deacons' Meeting when I was castigated for preaching too much about hell and the sinners' need to escape from the wrath of God. ... Is there such a thing to fear as the wrath of God? Should we mention it? Should we talk about it? *Ought* there to be a fear of the wrath of an angry God?

In Reformed circles, one of the most powerful sermons that was ever preached was on 8th July, 1741 by Jonathan Edwards. Jonathan Edwards was almost blind. It is said that he had to hold his notes up close to his eyes and use a large magnifying-glass to read them, and when he read them his tonal expression was almost totally mono-syllabic. But, nevertheless, God used this man mightily in the ingathering of precious souls in the New England area of the United States.

It is recorded that he was interrupted many times before he finished preaching by people moaning and crying out "What shall I do to be saved?" Not surprisingly his sermon came under heavy attack and he was criticised as being insensitive and alarmist ... but when you read his sermon you see that he is simply saying what the Scriptures say and that his words were meant only to bring people to understand the frightening truth concerning their condition.

I want to highlight to you some of the main points that he presented before his hearers, for I believe the saved, - as well the unsaved, - need to know about this terrible subject of "Sinners in the hands of an angry God". His first title was this ...

THE STATE OF MANKIND

- * He took his congregation to the words of God in Deut 32:35
To me belongeth vengeance, and recompense; their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste.
- * Here God was threatening the wicked, unbelieving and disobedient Israelites with destruction for living contrary to the law He set out in the Ten Commandments. God left them under no illusion, Dt. 32:32 For their vine is of the vine of Sodom, and of the fields of Gomorrah: their grapes are grapes of gall, their clusters are bitter: 33 Their wine is the poison of dragons, and the cruel venom of asps.
- * Edwards concentrated on the words in v.35, their foot shall slide in due time. He reminded them they were always exposed to slipping. The same thought is found in Ps. 73:18 Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction.
- * Since they were walking on these slippery places that they had found for themselves it was inevitable they would fall! Ps. 73:19 How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment! they are utterly consumed with terrors.
- * They didn't have to be pushed or thrown down by the hand of another, - they were totally capable of falling by themselves, - it was their own weight, the slipperiness of the route they took, their inability to stand was their own fault.
- * In Dt. 32:35 the reason they had not slipped *completely* is only because God's appointed time had not yet arrived, their foot *shall* slide in due time.
- * When that time arrives they shall be left to fall, - God through common grace will not lift them up, He will allow them to stay fallen. He will not hold them up any longer for He will let them go. And then, at that very moment, the Bible says they will fall into destruction, - they will fall and be lost.
- * Make sure you see what it means! Edwards preached, "There is nothing that keeps wicked men out of hell, at any one moment, except the mere pleasure of God. I mean His Sovereign pleasure, His all-powerful will, restrained by no obligation, hindered by no manner of difficulty; nothing else

but God's Sovereign will has a hand in the preservation of wicked men".

- * Don't you see what he is saying? He is saying that the reason the sinner is not in hell already is simply because of the Sovereign will and mercy of the Almighty God.
- * When God determines to take breath from the body *no-one* will stop Him. It is no-one's decision when to die, except God's. ... We all die when He says it is time ... it is His decision, and nobody will ever rob Him of it!
- * There is no fortress or any defence from the power of God, - you can't stop Him! When He pleases, He will cast His enemies into hell.
- * And sinners deserve to be cast into hell, - God's righteous justice demands righteous judgement ...
- * God won't look at them and make excuses for their sin, for He says in [Rom. 1:20](#) that *they are without excuse*.
- * Divine justice said of the tree that brought forth fruit like that of the poisonous grapes of Sodom, [Lk. 13:7](#) *cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?*
- * Divine justice calls out for reparation, and it is nothing but the hand of God's mercy and God's Sovereign will that holds His punishment back.
- * As Edwards continued to preach he reminded the congregation that "sinners are already under a sentence of condemnation to hell".
- * They have spurned the holiness and the purity and the majesty and the Sovereignty of God. They have rejected Him as King and as their Leader.
- * They have thrown back at Him the grace He offers them.
- * They deny God's goodness and reject that He provides all things, - the sinner doesn't realise that without God he would have nothing and he would already be in the fires of hell, [Jn. 3:18](#) *he that believeth not is condemned already*.
- * Every unconverted person properly belongs to hell, - that is his place, and his nature has its source in hell, [Ye are from beneath](#), said Jesus ([Jn. 8:23](#)).
- * "And the sinner is bound to that place, for hell is the place assigned to him by justice, by God's Word, and by the

sentence of His unchangeable law.” The sinner is surely the object of God’s wrath.

- * The devil stands ready to seize them, at whatever moment God will allow him. Sinners belong to the devil, [Jn. 8:44 Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do.](#) He has their souls in his possession and under his dominion.
- * He stands waiting for them but he will only get them when God allows him to step in.
- * When God withdraws His hand hell opens its mouth to receive them, and it is only God that is holding the sinner back from the jaws of eternity.
- * Just imagine what hell would be like when the wickedness of man’s heart is loosed into the fires. Evil would reign to an unimaginable degree. Man’s wickedness would be unleashed and the fury and torment of hell would be indescribable.
- * The pain and agony and torment of hell would make them even worse. They would tramp over the top of each other if they thought they could get a drop of water. How hell is totally inconceivable!
- * ... And man doesn’t know when he is going! He has shut his mind off to the eventual destiny of his own soul. Either he tells himself it’s not going to happen for a long time, or he will get the whole thing sorted out before it does happen, - he is just oblivious to the reality of facing God and being cast into the open fires of hell.
- * He doesn’t intend to go there ... but he deludes himself, [Jer. 42:17 none of them shall remain or escape from the evil that I will bring upon them.](#)
- * Many in hell, - if you could ask them when they were alive if they had intended to be there, - many would reply, “No, I reckoned I could have sorted it all out, but I didn’t reckon on death catching up with me the way it did”.
- * God has placed Himself under no obligation to keep any natural man out of hell. [I Cor. 2:14 the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.](#) The natural man is *dead* to the things of God (cf. Eph.2) and God is not expected to keep him from eternal destruction for a single moment.

- * Thus it is that natural man is held in the hand of God, over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it for *they have provoked God to wrath!*
- * Edwards, “All that preserves them every moment is the Sovereign, all-powerful will, the uncovenanted, unobliged forbearance, of an incensed God”.

The second point that Edwards brought to the attention of the unsaved is ...

SINNER, BEWARE!

- * He told those in the congregation who were outside of Christ, “Below you is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; hell’s mouth is gaping wide open ... There is nothing between you and hell except the air; it is only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up”.
- * The state of the sinner is in freefall, - he cannot do anything to stop himself plunging into hell. If God was to let him go completely this very moment he would plunge into the bottomless pit ... and there is nothing the sinner in his wilful stubbornness could do to stop himself.
- * It is simply the restraining hand of God that keeps back the eternal judgement upon the sinner. Edwards draws the picture of the reservoir/dam: the waters are restrained for the moment, but they increase and get higher and higher until there comes an outlet. The longer the stream is stopped, the mightier will be the overflowing when it happens. The waters of God’s wrath are rising and there is nothing but the mere pleasure of the Sovereign God holding them back.
- * When God withdraws His hand, the floodgates will immediately open and the fierceness and wrath of God will rush forth with inconceivable fury.
- * Edwards then said something that is so terrible but yet, - Biblically-speaking, - is true, “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 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 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. 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." **FIERCE WORDS ... BUT TRUE!**

Then, in his conclusion, the preacher makes ...

A WARNING TO ALL

- * He says it is a warning to everyone, - every man, every woman, and every child because all are born into sin.
- * It is not the wrath of an ordinary king, or ruler, or President, - this is the wrath of the Almighty God, before whom all will stand. [Is. 40:22 It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers.](#)
- * This is the wrath of the infinite and holy God. He is perfect and never does anything wrong. He is unblameable and unreproachable, and Jesus said, [Lk. 12: 4 And I say unto you my friends, Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. 5 But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him.](#)
- * The sinner is exposed to the fierceness of His wrath, [Is. 59:18 According to their deeds, accordingly he will repay, fury to his adversaries; Is. 66:15 behold, the LORD will come with fire, and with his chariots like a whirlwind, to render his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. Rev. 19:15 out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: ... and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.](#)
- * How dreadful these things must be! This is God ... the God of justice and the God of holiness. He rewards evil and sin with His wrath, - that is Divine Justice. He does not excuse sin or 'gloss over' it. He moves to wipe it out and He does so eternally in the fires of hell.

- * There will be no moderation or mercy; He won't lessen the punishment when He hears the loudness of the cries. He will no longer have any regard for the sinner in hell, Ezek. 8:18 Therefore will I also deal in fury: mine eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity: and though they cry in mine ears with a loud voice, yet will I not hear them.
- * ... Rom. 9: 22 What if God, willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction ... there is no other use for the vessel ... when the mercy of God has gone silent, read this, ... Prov. 1:24 Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; 25 But ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: 26 I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; 27 When your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. 28 Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me: 29 For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the LORD: 30 They would none of my counsel: they despised all my reproof. 31 Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices. 32 For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them. 33 But whoso hearkeneth unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil.
- * Is. 63:3 3 I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment. 4 For the day of vengeance is in mine heart.
- * How long will His wrath last? It will last forever! He will never lessen the impact and fury of hell. He will never clothe the sinner with some sort of resistance to His wrath; Edwards, "How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in the danger of this great wrath and infinite misery!"

CONCLUSION

- * Do you get a hold of what Jonathan Edwards was preaching about, when he preached on the subject of "Sinners in the hands of an angry God"?

- * Everyone of us here have loved ones who are [vessels of wrath fitted to destruction \(Rom. 9:22\)](#).
- * Do you care for their eternal destiny? Of course, you do ... *you must!* They are walking blindly towards the abyss of everlasting punishment in hell; they cannot feel the heat of the fires; they cannot smell the stench of the damned! ... but surely you must warn them!
- * Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to die on the cross of Calvary as the Lamb, - the only Sacrifice that God is willing to accept. It was Divine Love hanging on the cross ... and that Divine Love is the only Instrument that will turn away the Divine Wrath of God. Nothing else saves but believing faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing else saves but Christ and Christ alone, - He is the only, Biblically-undisputed means of escape from hell.
- * It doesn't matter what our loved ones think or even what you think, - the wrath of God is real, it is so frighteningly real, - your loved ones and my loved ones outside of Christ are heading towards this everlasting punishment. It is what the Bible says and it is what we must accept!
- * Have you got a grasp of hell? It is not hell as preached by an ordinary man; it is hell as presented in the Word of God.
- * May God grip us with its danger and its severity, for the sake of our unsaved loved ones ... and may He in Sovereign grace and mercy use us to win them to Himself, for His glory.
- * May it indeed be our prayer: "Lead me to some soul today. Teach me Lord, just what to say. Friends of mine are lost in sin and cannot find their way. Few there are who seem to care and few there are who pray. Melt my heart and fill my soul ... Give me, Lord, one soul today!" Amen.