

## **Sinners in the hands of an angry God**

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### **Introduction**

I want to thank you all for coming today, especially given the title of this service. It's not often you get to stand up and tell a bunch of UUs that they're going to hell.

Actually, I've wanted for years to do a sermon with this title -- after all, it does roll easily off the tongue. Sinners in the hands of an angry God!! It could grow on you.

My original idea was just to use the title and talk about something completely different. Then I decided that if I was using the title I owed it to the author, Jonathan Edwards, to at least give him an introduction before veering off on a different tack. And I remembered a lesson that anyone who deals at all in history should learn: just because someone lived almost 300 years ago doesn't mean they were stupid. Quite the contrary: we probably remember them because they were in some way brilliant or extraordinary.

I had read some of the original sermon before and found nothing good in it. It was extremely long, repetitive, and each new paragraph was the worst one yet. You will hear some of it in due course.

But when I went back to read it again, I thought about what it said, and why Jonathan Edwards felt it was meaningful and necessary to harangue his congregants in this fashion. Why? What would he achieve, and what could they possibly gain from being told over and over again that they were evil and could expect to burn in hell for all eternity?

Today I am going to consider this question, and offer a generous interpretation, and will conclude with some thoughts on what, if my interpretation is valid, Jonathan Edwards might say to you if he was standing here today.

### **Readings**

#### First reading

from Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"

4. They are now the objects of that very same anger and wrath of God, that is expressed in the torments of hell. And the reason why they do not go down to hell at each moment, is not because God, in whose power they are, is not then very angry with them; as he is with many miserable creatures now tormented in hell, who there feel and bear the fierceness of his wrath. Yea, God is a great deal more angry with great numbers that are now on earth; yea, doubtless, with many that are now in this congregation, who it may be are at ease, than he is with many of those who are now in the flames of hell.—So that it is not because God is unmindful of their wickedness, and does not resent it, that he does not let loose his hand and cut them off. God is not altogether such an one as themselves, though they may imagine him to be so. The wrath of God burns against them, their damnation does not slumber; the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is

now hot, ready to receive them; the flames do now rage and glow. The glittering sword is whet, and held over them, and the pit hath opened its mouth under them.

### Second reading

from Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"

This acceptable year of the Lord, a day of such great favor to some, will doubtless be a day of as remarkable vengeance to others. Men's hearts harden, and their guilt increases apace at such a day as this, if they neglect their souls; and never was there so great danger of such persons being given up to hardness of heart and blindness of mind. God seems now to be hastily gathering in his elect in all parts of the land; and probably the greater part of adult persons that ever shall be saved, will be brought in now in a little time, and that it will be as it was on the great out-pouring of the Spirit upon the Jews in the apostles days; the election will obtain, and the rest will be blinded. If this should be the case with you, you will eternally curse this day, and will curse the day that ever you was born, to see such a season of the pouring out of God's Spirit, and will wish that you had died and gone to hell before you had seen it. Now undoubtedly it is, as it was in the days of John the Baptist, the axe is in an extraordinary manner laid at the root of the trees, that every tree which brings not forth good fruit, may be hewn down and cast into the fire.

Therefore, let every one that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come. The wrath of Almighty God is now undoubtedly hanging over a great part of this congregation. Let every one fly out of Sodom: "Haste and escape for your lives, look not behind you, escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed."

### Third reading

"Our ability to repent comes from God's grace"

Letter in the Champaign-Urbana News Gazette, June 29, 2019

I would like to respond to those who wrote the article, "Christ calls us to accept everyone."

First of all, the content of this letter sounds exactly like the beliefs of secular humanists I have written about the last five years.

Secondly, the words diversity and inclusiveness are progressive terms.

Thirdly, they reject the Holy Bible. 1 Corinthians, chapter 6, verses 9-10 say: "Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."

My fourth point: They do not get to decide right and wrong apart from the Bible.

My fifth point: The Triune God calls all people to repentance. There is no salvation without repentance. Matthew chapter 4, verse 17 says: "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

No. 6: The word repentance is defined in the Bible as a change of mind and heart with regard to sin, so that there is a turning away. If someone is truly repentant, there will be evidence in their life of repentance.

No. 7: The ability to repent is 100 percent an act of God's grace. Without God's divine intervention and grace, we would never want to repent of our sins.

No. 8: Those claiming salvation without repentance cannot know God.

BILL DENNY  
Urbana

### **Sermon**

Jonathan Edwards (born July 28, 1703) is an American singer-songwriter and musician best known for his 1971 hit single "[Sunshine](#)". But the Jonathan Edwards we are concerned with was a Congregationalist preacher and theologian in New England in the first half of the 18th century. In 1741 he preached a sermon titled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God", first at his own church at Northampton, Massachusetts, and then a couple of months later, on July 8, in the town of Enfield, Mass. This is perhaps the most famous sermon ever delivered in America, and it is still read, discussed and studied to this day. A boulder with a plaque on it commemorates the sermon, at the location of the church where Edwards preached on that day, which is today on the grounds of the Enfield Montessori school.

Why is this sermon so famous and still read? You have heard some excerpts, and if you haven't read the whole thing I can assure you that it doesn't get any better. One thing it does have going for it, as I alluded to earlier, is that it does have a snappy title. Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. May I ask, how many of you have heard of this sermon before today? [Many people had] And can you give the title of one of Florence's sermons from the past year? [One person responded!]

"Sinners" had considerable impact on the day it was given. It's a little longer than we're used to hearing; my printed version runs to 15 pages, or nearly four times the length of a typical sermon in this church. At least one YouTube version goes 48 minutes. But it is reported that Edwards never finished the sermon that day; long before the ending he was interrupted by many people in the crowd moaning, and asking what they could do to save themselves. I too would have wanted to save myself long before the 48 minutes were up.

At the time of the sermon, there was a major Revival going on in New England, and Edwards was one of the instigators and major figures. He and other preachers went from town to town, preaching sermons and trying to get people to accept Christ, which they felt was important for the spiritual and social wellbeing of the people. The Revival was both popular and controversial. Over the next ten years Edwards' congregation became increasingly discontented with him, and finally in 1751 he was voted out. He took over a church in Stockbridge, MA, and then in 1758 was named president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton). Soon after assuming this

position he volunteered to be inoculated with smallpox, partially to encourage others to do the same, but he reacted badly to the inoculation and died soon thereafter.

Jonathan Edwards was the son of a preacher and a preacher's daughter. He showed an early interest in science and philosophy and entered Yale shortly before turning thirteen. Among other things he studied ballooning behavior in spiders, and throughout his life he turned to nature for spiritual experience, peaceful contemplation and prayer, and evidence of the existence and works of God. He believed that Hell is real, and though in his younger years he thought it was unfair that God should cast sinners into the Pit, by his early twenties he was apparently quite comfortable with this doctrine. He was a prolific writer, and Yale University has made available twenty-six volumes of his collected works, with more still to come. Although popularly associated with fire and brimstone, he reportedly was a quiet yet engaging speaker, who moved his audiences through a careful logical progression to his conclusion, who used vivid and gripping imagery and biblical quotations so effectively that listeners lost track of time and were surprised when the sermon ended.

Edwards was part of a vigorous and diverse theological community, in New England and the rest of the colonies and in correspondence with the Old World. The Calvinist tradition in which he grew up had given rise to several groups with differing view of God, creation, heaven and hell, and other theological questions. The Universalists were already pushing back on the very idea of hell. Edwards is seen by some as a transitional figure between the older Calvinist theology and the later Protestant traditions of the 19th century.

Why do we remember Edwards today? In part I think it is because of a famous sermon with a memorable title. But it is also because he was a very influential preacher, and a prominent theologian in America's early days when many new ideas were born and developed. The preaching and the theology go together; he asked and answered the questions needed to appeal to and convince his audiences. "The Theology of Jonathan Edwards" includes thirty chapters on subjects such as Beauty, Metaphysics, the Trinity, Creation, the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, Virtue, Love and Ethical Theory, Free Will and Original Sin, and so on. Scholars cite the scope, depth and originality of his work. And if nothing else, for a theologian looking for a subject to write on, there is plenty of material.

You may expect that his theology was pretty grim. And yet, the contemporary theologian Gerald McDermott, in his book "Understanding Jonathan Edwards" gives a somewhat different picture. He writes that "the heart of Edwards' view of God is *beauty*....Edwards made beauty more integral to his theology than has anyone else in the history of Christian thought....Edwards' God is truth, and he shows us the definitive meaning of life...this God is a being of terrible beauty who lures rather than coerces and whose aesthetic magnificence sets the soul free to love truth, and to love others....He believed in the authority of both Scripture and reason....he emphasized a host of practices for spiritual growth including fasting and prayer, rigorous study, recollection of present and past sins, perseverance through times of suffering, and continual striving for holiness....That god is present in one's neighbor, especially in the poor. Therefore the most direct and pleasing way for the Christian to love God is to serve people in society and give to the poor....All human beings have the same general sense of moral good and evil, Therefore Christians and non-Christians...can and must sometimes work together in common social

projects for the sake of those moral goals. All true virtue on this earth creates community. The essence of virtue is love, and the nature of truly virtuous love is to reach out to being in general. In reaching out, we enlarge ourselves because we are coming into union with God and all his creation. Love's nature, then is to create community by seeking union with others."

Yes, we really are talking about the same person who wrote that sermon. Many of his views appear to be compatible with those of contemporary UU's, including us. Also, here's an awkward fact that needs to be mentioned but doesn't really fit anywhere else: he was a slave owner his entire adult life, although he did apparently denounce the importation of slaves from Africa. Life is complicated.

So why did he give that sermon? Here is my most generous interpretation: according to his personal theology and the general beliefs of his time, he was asking his listeners to do what was most important for them, to save themselves. In the words of theologian John Piper, "Edwards could not remain silent ... Hell awaits every unconverted person. Love must warn them with the threats of the Lord." His morality would not allow others to be needlessly condemned to Hell.

And why is he remembered? Because many people today are concerned with the same ideas. One commentary I read on the web suggested that there is way too much emphasis on Heaven among Christians these days and not nearly enough on Hell, and he wants to restore the balance.

Well, that's all very well and good for Jonathan Edwards. He delivered his message, apparently it was heard, and it still lives on today.

What about us?

In the most generous interpretation, Edwards wished nothing but the best for his audience, and so pleaded with them to save themselves from Hell by accepting Christ.

Like Edwards, I wish nothing but the best for you, and for myself, and so I also propose that we take steps to save ourselves from Hell. But I am thinking of a different set of steps, and a different version of Hell.

For Edwards, and for all the Christians who tried to convert me while I was in college, salvation was within yourself; all you need do was to accept Christ. One simple step and you're saved and can look forward to eternal life.

For Unitarian Universalists, "salvation" (and I have that in big bold quotes) is a much more complicated process. For starters, it's not just within; it is, as George Harrison said, within you and without you. Our salvation comes with both belief and action; we must try to live a good life and try to make a better world. We have to act.

Also, it never ends. We keep examining our beliefs, asking ourselves if we're doing the right things, and what more we can do. One step salvation doesn't cut it.

And you'll be glad to know that Hell doesn't come in just one flavor -- one reason why it's so much more interesting than Heaven. There are hells of loneliness and despair, lives filled with wealth and possessions but empty of meaning, hells of illness and lack of purpose, lives lived through the television. And today, June 30 2019, Hell has literal and urgent meanings that come

from climate change, the rumblings of fascism, and the resurgence of war, disease, famine and pestilence. These last were portrayed in Revelation as “the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” that would decimate the human population of the Earth, and we in the US have been fortunate in our lifetimes to mostly ignore them -- but that may change. Climate change, and particularly warming, does not only affect the temperature: it changes where species can live. For some it means that their habitats will shrink or disappear and they face extinction; for others, adapted to warm climates, it is an invitation to spread out. The species that spread out most quickly are the insects and the microorganisms, along with their associated viruses. The spread is amplified by human travel. The likely results are new diseases that spread rapidly in naive populations, loss of crops to climate, infections and invasive insects, and famines that encourage human migrations and aggressions. Without very stable social and national structures in place, our ability to withstand these challenges is in doubt, and right now those existing structures are under considerable strain.

So where lies the path to salvation? I have a number of suggestions, and that number is of course ....? Three. Three shall be the number of the count. But I also have subheadings. Also, I'm thinking long range here; in the short term you're on your own.

#### 1. Uphold the dignity and worth of every person

This means equality for all. Not the equality we have now, but genuine equality. Billionaires and bums are equal, along with everyone else. Everyone.

We say this, and we may have gotten used to saying it, but it's a powerful idea and one that should find much greater application in our political and legal systems. Too many people are lacking in the basic necessities to function in our modern society, or face unending obstacles to getting ahead, while others have far more than they will ever need or use.

Even more find their basic worth questioned every day, whether at home, at work, or in the political views of people they will never know. I remember a favorite saying of one of my supervisors, who was otherwise quite a decent person, when he felt that an employee had overstepped: “who died and left you in charge?” Or in other words, why do you think you have any right to think and take initiative?

Many of us do believe in the worth of every person, or hold that as an ideal, but plenty of others don't. Many Americans are perfectly happy to see other Americans in prison, or worse.

There is a large number of practices that are collectively known as “gotcha” capitalism, in which rather than making something of value and selling it to willing buyers, you take advantage of inequalities in power, or information, or legal custom to extract more from your customers than they really want to give. Many companies offer high interest loans to customers who know little about alternatives. Banks charge extra fees to boost their revenues. Insurance companies try to sign up customers and not pay. There is a longstanding tradition of music agents and managers getting artists to sign away rights to their music without realizing it.

Why is it that my bank can charge me a fee if it doesn't like what I do, but I can't charge them a fee if I don't like what they did?

Our laws and legal system prescribe rules and process but not outcomes. The "rule of law" is held to be sacrosanct. What is not held to be sacrosanct is some minimum level of dignity and fair treatment accorded to every person. The legal system puts its trust in laws and rules and not in the remarkable and acute ability of humans to recognize what is fair. Judges and juries are asked and expected to follow the law, not to arrive at a just outcome. Yet humans are more ingenious than any set of laws, and those with money and power can either elude the system or use it to further their own ends.

## 2. Find meaning in life

What does this mean? What is a meaningful life? This is an urgent question for our time, and one that underlies much of the political tension in our country and others. On the one hand, quality of life means the basics: food, education, health, and other essentials for taking part in society and having an opportunity for advancement. On the other hand, once you get past the basics it means the search for deeper values and meaning, for happiness and satisfaction. This is where many people start to flounder and lose their way.

Finding meaning in life is both an individual and a social enterprise. For the individual, it comes from examination and exploration. You can study science, art, music, meditation, body work, nature, psychology, baseball, chess or the mysteries of human existence. You will never run out of interesting and challenging things to engage your mind and spirit. This should be simple, yet many people -- maybe most people -- don't seem to be able to do it on their own..

For the society it means regaining and reforming connections and community that were an essential part of the villages and tribes from which we all come, but in which we no longer live. Social isolation and the lack of community are major problems and give rise to the disaffection felt in our politics. Forming genuine connections takes work, and there is no cookbook procedure. So do what you can and be creative. Joining a welcoming, inclusive and social justice minded church might be a good step.

## 3. Live with nature and reduce our human footprint

We are part of the natural world, and depend on it, but we are also putting enormous pressure on nature and driving many species to extinction. I would like to think we can do better. One of the pleasures of living in Urbana is enjoying the oasis and wildlife sanctuary known as Meadowbrook Park, where very large numbers of animals and plants occupy a small patch of prairie. Another is seeing the number of species that are learning to coexist with us if we will let them. We rarely see them, but skunks, raccoons and foxes are around, deer occasionally come into some neighborhoods, and many of us remember the infamous Urbana turkeys. We sometimes see and hear owls, and there are some hawks who seem to have moved in permanently. I love knowing that some of these wild creatures are around. Other places have greater challenges: in the Bella Coola valley of British Columbia they are trying hard to live with the grizzly bears. Mostly things go well, but there are occasional incidents and not everyone is on board. Getting along with tigers and elephants is no doubt still more of a

challenge, but if we understood them better I am sure we could manage it, and it's what we should do.

In the long run I hope that human residences will have smaller footprints and smaller impact and allow more of the wildlife, particularly the large animals, to coexist freely. As we occupy less land, and pave over less of it for strips and malls and streets and warehouses and parking lots, maybe we the people can return some of it to the nations and tribes that were here when Europeans arrived.

Uphold the dignity and worth of every person. Live a good life. Live with a smaller footprint. These are good ideals, and I think they are also mutually reinforcing. A life with more soul and less material will be more respectful and leave a smaller footprint.

Somehow they have to be combined with the ability to keep like-minded people at the top of the world power structure. The meek shall not inherit the earth; they have to fight to keep it safe.

In the end I think salvation comes down to a difference between following a rule and listening to stories. Following the rule is simpler. Listening to stories takes effort, and it takes our whole lives, because both the stories and our understanding of them change over time. If you want to be saved, listen to the stories: of the earth and living things, of other people, and to the story within yourself.

Amen.