

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Per \_\_\_\_\_

from

# Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

Jonathan Edwards

So that, thus it is that natural men<sup>1</sup> 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 abate<sup>2</sup> 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 fain<sup>3</sup>

10 lay hold on them, and swallow them up; the fire pent up in their own hearts is struggling to break out: And they have no interest in any Mediator,<sup>4</sup> 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 forbearance<sup>5</sup> of an incensed<sup>6</sup> 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. That world

20 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

### VOCABULARY

**provoked** (prə·vōkt') v. used as *adj.*: angered.

**appease** (ə·pēz') v.: calm; satisfy.

### IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 8–10. Circle the nouns, and underline the verbs and verb forms that create images of horror. (Review Skill)

### CLARIFY

Re-read lines 17–21. What does Edwards say is his **purpose** for discussing the subject of sinners and punishment? Underline the answer.

### IDENTIFY

Underline the images in lines 19–22 that help you picture this "world of misery." (Review Skill)

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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."
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.

**IDENTIFY**

According to Edwards, what would happen if God were to "withdraw His hand" (lines 29–38)?

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**CLARIFY**

State the message of lines 39–46 in your own words.

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**VOCABULARY**

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

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

**INTERPRET**

Lines 47–51 contain a powerful simile. To what is Edwards comparing God's wrath? Underline the answer. (Review Skill)

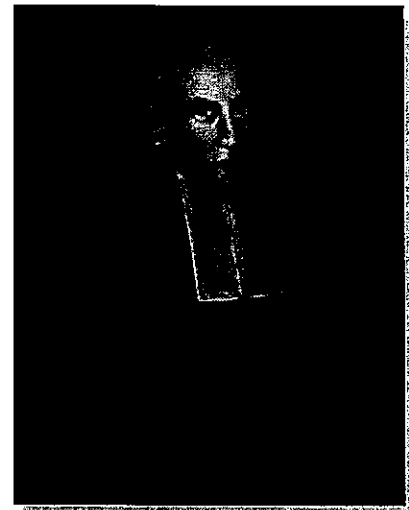
have nothing to stand upon,  
nor anything to take hold of;  
there is nothing between you  
and hell but the air; it is only  
the power and mere pleasure  
of God that holds you up.

30 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.

40 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 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. . . .

50 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



Reverend Jonathan Edwards (1750–1755) by Joseph Badger. Oil on canvas (28½" × 22").

Yale University Art Gallery. Bequest of Eugene Phelps Edwards (1938.74).

60 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.

70 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 with your blood. 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,<sup>7</sup> and may keep up a form of religion in your families and closets,<sup>8</sup> and in the house of God, it is nothing but His mere pleasure that  
80 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.

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

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

**VOCABULARY**

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

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

**INTERPRET**

Underline the extended **metaphor** in lines 66–71 that Edwards uses to describe God's wrath. Explain the metaphor in your own words. (*Review Skill*)

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**ANALYZE**

What does Edwards believe will happen to people who practice religion but haven't given themselves to God (lines 76–81)?

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**ANALYZE**

Re-read lines 89–95. What two creatures does Edwards compare sinners to?

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**VOCABULARY**

**abhors** (ab·hōrz') *v.*: scorns; hates.

**abominable**  
(ə·bām'ə·nə·bəl) *adj.*: hateful; disgusting.

**ascribed** (ə·skrībd') *v.*: regarded as coming from a certain cause.

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

**ANALYZE**

Re-read lines 98–103. Underline the phrases that sum up Edwards's belief about why sinners have not fallen into the fires of hell.

**FLUENCY**

Read the boxed passage aloud two times. On the first read, pay attention to punctuation signaling when you should pause, when you should come to a complete stop, and where you should use your voice to show emotion. The second time you read, try to bring Edwards's imagery to life.

90 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. 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 was 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.

110 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;<sup>9</sup> 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. . . .

9. asunder *adv.*: into pieces.

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### Jonathan Edwards: To Speak Rhetorically of Ultimate Things

Jonathan Edwards was a man of paradox: an Enlightenment thinker with reactionary values, a minister who wanted to turn back the clock to the ideology of the first generation of Puritans, those who stressed, above all, a commitment to the spiritual rather than to the material. Some have called Edwards “our country’s first systematic philosopher.”<sup>1</sup> A product of the Enlightenment, he practiced inductive thinking. As a Puritan, his thinking was rooted in theology and embodied in memoirs and sermons, the most famous being “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” ([www.jonathanedwards.com/sermons/Warnings/sinners.htm](http://www.jonathanedwards.com/sermons/Warnings/sinners.htm)).

Unless students have attended a revival meeting, they probably have no context for the type of sermon that Edwards was preaching in July of 1741, over a hundred years after the arrival of the *Arabella* in Boston. As a first step, before they have even read the sermon, ask students to discuss the title. What seems to be Edwards’s assumption about the members of his congregation, perhaps indeed of himself? And what seems to be his assumption about the nature of God? Have students read the epigraph from Deuteronomy, “Their foot shall slide in due time.” What associations do they make with these words? What familiar phrases or proverbs speak of “sliding,” and in what ways—metaphorical and moral—can one slide? Students now have a better context for reading the sermon itself.

Begin with a look at its structure. Encourage students to note how Edwards constructs his argument, moving from an explication of the verse from Deuteronomy to an application of it for his contemporaries. The application section is, in fact, the one often excerpted from this sermon: the section containing the famous image of the spider—a human being—suspended by the hand of God over the flames of Hell. Once students have read the sermon, they can work through the well-known exercise, SOAPS, identifying the text’s Subject, Occasion, Audience, Purpose, and Speaker—specifically, the speaker’s role or persona. These steps should, of course, be augmented with follow-up questions that lead students to explore additional layers of the text.

Edwards here is preaching a particular type of sermon—a jeremiad. The term is derived from the prophet Jeremiah and indicates a type of sermon or speech in which the speaker not only rebukes the audience but also challenges them by reminding them of the higher standards to which they should aspire. In Edwards’s case, those standards were embodied

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<sup>1</sup> Sculley, Bradley et al., eds., *The American Tradition in Literature*, 4th ed. (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, Inc., 1974), 89.

## Special Focus: Writing Persuasively

in the desire of the first generation of Puritans to be a city on a hill, an example to all nations. Edwards in his jeremiad offers this subtext: that people in Massachusetts have lost sight of the original Puritan mission, that their God isn't pleased, and that God's displeasure with humanity has manifested itself throughout history. In the discussion of "occasion," students should note that the sermon was delivered in July in a hot, crowded church—and the subject is the possibility of spending eternity in Hell. Again, ask students what Edwards assumes about his audience, adding questions about the appeals he uses. Is he appealing primarily to logos? Pathos? Ethos? (Aristotle's three appeals, roughly translated, are "reason," "feeling," and "character.") Based on what we know of the era, would our answer differ if we were living in the eighteenth century? Later in the survey, ask how Jefferson or Madison, other Enlightenment figures, would assess Edwards's argument.

For an analysis of Edwards's purpose, students must be encouraged to go beyond the obvious ("to scare people") and note the concluding section: Edwards wants his congregants to repent. He writes, "How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in danger of this great wrath, and infinite misery! But this is the dismal case of every soul in this congregation, that has not been born again," adding in the last paragraph, "[L]et every one that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come." Inspiring his congregants to be "born again" is Edwards's overarching purpose. Teachers might want to present some background about the Half-Way Covenant to help students understand the theological context of Edwards's remarks. As for "speaker" or persona, research (via numerous Web sites or George Marsden's excellent recent biography) and trot out the fascinating biographical details of Edwards's life to establish why his call to repentance would be particularly effective, noting that he was an erudite, respected individual who even advocated tolerance for Native Americans despite the deaths of family members and friends from raids. As for "literary" elements of this text, one can turn to the patterns of images that Edwards uses both for God and for the people of God. But to focus exclusively on these elements, without establishing a rhetorical context, would result in a limited reading of the text, not the richer one that AP English Language teachers should encourage.

### **Anne Bradstreet: Argument Wedded to Faith and Passion**

The poetry of the Puritan era can be approached rhetorically as well. Anne Bradstreet was America's first great poet, and noting that she was a writer whose life overlapped Shakespeare's helps students to contextualize her work. In a discussion of Bradstreet's poetry, for example, teachers could again walk students through the SOAPS model, supplemented with more nuanced questions—ones that ask students to compare and contrast, to evaluate, and to speculate. Bradstreet's well-known "Verses upon the Burning