

JONATHAN EDWARDS, *SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD* (8 July 1741)

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Abstract: Jonathan Edwards's notorious 1741 sermon to the congregation at Enfield is more than an exercise in audience manipulation or rhetorical cruelty. Edwards integrated his own concerns and the concerns of his time into his message, exploring relationships between freedom and sovereignty, change and authority, and the proper role of religion in community life. Through this sermon we can better understand the tensions surrounding a significant transitional period in American life—commonly called the "Great Awakening."

Key Words: Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Solomon Stoddard, Great Awakening, Revival, Northampton, Faithful Narrative, Enfield, Puritan, Itinerant, Authority of Ministers, Hell

For many readers, the first exposure to *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*¹ is like taking a trip to a different world, a different planet, a set of norms and values very alien to our own. At the same time, in an age fraught with religious controversy, the text may seem all too familiar, like the rhetoric of extremist religious dogmas that force themselves, from time to time, upon the modern consciousness. Certainly, to modern readers, Jonathan Edwards's sermon may well appear the work of a skillful but sadistic fear-monger, a wide-eyed radical. Many of us might instinctively sympathize with the attitude of the famous American lawyer Clarence Darrow when he said of Edwards, "Nothing but a distorted or diseased mind could have produced his 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.' Nothing but the puritanical, cruel generation in which he lived could have tolerated it."²

And yet there is much more going on in this infamous sermon than is immediately apparent to the modern reader. More than an isolated exercise in cruel audience manipulation, *Sinners* is a work grounded in the concerns and struggles of its time, and it offers insights into a significant period of cultural transition in American history.³ Simultaneously a conservative and a revolutionary text, the sermon hangs between the new and the old, science and Scripture, individual freedom and sovereign authority. Like Edwards's famous spider, dangling on a thread, it remains a text in tension—ultimately unresolved—and it is in the context of this tension that we can best explore and understand its meaning and meaningfulness for its author, its original audience, and the thousands of readers over the years who have been both attracted and repulsed by its power.

The Road to Revival

Born on October 5, 1703, in East Windsor, Connecticut, Jonathan Edwards was the fifth child—and the only son out of eleven children—born to the Reverend Timothy Edwards and his wife Esther Stoddard Edwards.⁴ In 1716, Edwards entered Yale—which was then only slightly older than he was himself. He completed his graduate studies in 1722. It was during these years that he had his own conversion experience and developed the intense personal disciplines that he would carry with him throughout his life.

In 1727, Edwards left a tutor position at Yale to become the associate minister at his grandfather Solomon Stoddard's church in Northampton. Two years later, after Stoddard's death, Edwards took over the congregation.⁵ Stoddard was arguably the most powerful religious figure in New England in his day, and, according to Edwards, he led five different religious revivals during his sixty years (1669-1729) as pastor at Northampton.⁶ The revivalist methodologies that Stoddard developed became models that Edwards would follow throughout his pastoral ministry.⁷ Stoddard challenged, in several ways, the traditional Puritan understanding of the sermon and its role in piercing the hearts of the unregenerate with the truth of the gospel.⁸

First, while the Puritans traditionally taught that conversion was a gradual process of clearly demarcated steps through which God worked on the minds and hearts of the unregenerate, Stoddard emphasized a simpler, more emotionally driven conversion that could come to anyone at anytime. Although retaining, as did his grandson after him, the belief that God alone could choose the elect who would receive salvation, Stoddard stressed the arbitrary and unknowable nature of God's choice.⁹ Thus, while still denying ultimate human agency, Stoddard could encourage his congregation to actively turn to God, seeking and praying earnestly for redemption, which might come upon anyone at any moment. This, in turn, opened the doors for more pronounced revival preaching—providing a model of conversion that could take place in an instantaneous recognition of divine grace.¹⁰

Secondly, where the traditional Puritan sermon was a careful, rational development of a theme, designed primarily to speak to those already saved, Stoddard diminished the purely rational content of his messages and made room for emotion as a legitimate means of persuasion. For the early Puritan leaders, knowledge was thought to precede faith, so that it was only in the context of proper understanding, achieved under the auspices of a minister of the gospel, that salvation would normally come.¹¹ Stoddard, on the other hand, accepted the legitimacy of emotional appeal and was willing to use all available means at his disposal—including threats of eternal hellfire—to drive sinners to repentance. While Stoddard's fire-and-brimstone sermons lacked the artful horror and drama perfected by his grandson and later revivalists, they pushed the boundaries of acceptable sermon material and sowed the seeds from which sermons like *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* would eventually grow.¹²

Stoddard's influence and popularity must have been a heavy burden for his serious and quiet grandson. By the exacting standard of perfection that Edwards had

honed during his years as a student at Yale, the congregation he inherited at Northampton was woefully mired in sin. After Stoddard's death, Edwards reported that "it seemed to be a time of extraordinary dullness in religion," and particularly among the young people of the congregation, which included the frequenting of taverns, nighttime "frolics" and "night-walking" with members of the opposite sex.¹³

Like his father, Edwards was meticulous, dedicated, and exacting in his personal life. During his time at Northampton, Edwards ate and slept little, presenting a gaunt, almost ethereal figure to the members of his congregation. Every morning, he got out of bed while it was still dark in order to spend 13 hours a day reading, writing, and praying in his study.¹⁴ His only regular recreation consisted of the walks or rides that he took during the evenings for his health. Although he was almost always willing to meet with congregants and established regular meetings with the young people of the church, Edwards was never good at small talk or casual socializing.¹⁵ He was a serious and intense young man, and he expected the same degree of intensity from others.¹⁶ It was, therefore, inevitable that the comparatively frivolous and temporally minded congregation at Northampton should be a source of worry, doubt, and frustration for their new minister who, at 25, had been left to replace one of the most charismatic and popular religious figures of his generation. Nor did it help that Edwards promoted the myth of a golden age under Stoddard's ministerial rule, a myth that did not match the congregation he inherited.¹⁷ In reality, despite Northampton's affection and respect for Stoddard, the old minister had been well into his eighties when he died, and, as he grew older and feebler, the people grew bolder in their sin. The youth, in particular, had become used to pushing the boundaries of decorum,¹⁸ and, taking advantage of the old minister's failing eyesight, they used to whisper and play amongst themselves during services—behavior that shocked Edwards when he observed it.

Hoping to revitalize the religious affections of his congregation and recreate his grandfather's revivals, Edwards rose to the challenge with a ministerial style that carefully mixed harsh condemnation of sin with promises of socialization into a new Christian community. Combining elements of Stoddard's preaching style with his own intellectual strengths, Edwards preached powerful invectives against the sins of the community and called his people to repent and turn to Christ. Unlike Stoddard, who famously preached without notes, Edwards was not a naturally gifted speaker,¹⁹ but he had a powerful intellect and each sermon was a careful delineation of a theme or passage that left his listeners with little doubt as to the will of God for their lives. Furthermore, Stoddard's influence prompted his grandson to mix reason with emotion and to instill the fear of hellfire, so that his people might, in their terror, repent and seek salvation.²⁰ Beyond these threats and condemnations, however, Edwards also began reestablishing the church as the center of social as well as religious life, particularly among the young people. Rather than simply condemning the sinful practices of the youth, Edwards provided them with alternatives for socialization, away from their families but still under the watchful eye of the young minister. In his sermons, Edwards began appealing directly to the youth, and he preached special sermons for them on Sunday evenings, meeting with them privately, and challenging them to join their peers in following Christ.²¹

By 1733, the youth had begun to respond.²² And, by December of 1734, as Edwards explained, "the Spirit of God began extraordinarily to set in, and wonderfully to work amongst us."²³ Revival had once again come to Northampton. Unlike previous revivals, which were mostly confined to local towns and villages, the 1734 revival spread throughout the region as visitors who came to town "had their consciences smitten and awakened" and took revivalism from Northampton to their own communities.²⁴ Emotions ran high. As Edwards said in a letter he wrote during the revival, "This town never was so full of love, nor so full of joy, nor so full of distress as it has lately been."²⁵ For those who came to salvation, there was great rejoicing. For those still in doubt about their eternal state, however, it was a fearful time, with different people being more or less strongly affected by the terror for their souls that gripped the populace and preceded "any comfortable evidences of pardon and acceptance with God."²⁶ Nevertheless, it was, by Edwards's account at least, a joyful period for the congregation and the region, and certainly a validation of the new minister's ability to lead his people as his grandfather had done so powerfully for so many years.²⁷

However, by the end of May, 1735, Edwards reported, "It began to be very sensible that the Spirit of God was gradually withdrawing from us."²⁸ Emotions were waning, and the number of conversions began to decline. Finally, the joy was cut short, and the momentum of the Northampton revival came to an abrupt and notably violent halt when, on a Sunday morning, June 1, 1735, Edwards's uncle, Joseph Hawley, slit his own throat in a fit of despair over the state of his soul.²⁹ Euphoria quickly turned to melancholy and despair as the people of Northampton, so emotionally driven towards seeking after God, slipped into dangerous depression. After Hawley's suicide, Edwards wrote that: "multitudes in this and other towns seemed to have it strongly suggested to 'em, and pressed upon 'em, to do as this person had done."³⁰ And even those who had formerly seemed happy and content fell into despair over their assurance of salvation and of God's blessing.

In typical fashion, Edwards looked first to himself for the cause of the revival's decline: "I am sensible I have reason to lie down in the dust in my own infirmities and unworthiness," he wrote to a friend, "I am nothing, and can do nothing: I desire your prayers that I may be more sensible, of it, and that God would grant me his presence and assistance, and *again* grant me success."³¹ Beginning as a triumph for the young, inexperienced pastor, the 1734-1735 revival ultimately left Edwards divided and troubled. On the one hand, convinced that he had experienced nothing less than the direct intervention of God in the lives of his people, he was equally convinced that it was only a matter of time until God's spirit would move again in that way. His *Faithful Narrative*—giving an account of God's work in Northampton during the revival months—was distributed widely throughout the colonies and abroad, and its circulation helped generate widespread interest in revival, creating a common language of revivalism and laying the foundation for what later came to be called the "Great Awakening." On the other hand, Hawley's death forced Edwards to confront his youthful naiveté and demonstrated that joyful religious emotions could so quickly turn to despair and deterioration.³² Over the next few years, Edwards witnessed the apparent fruits of his first revival disintegrate, as emotions cooled and the people returned to their sinful

ways. He wrote that the revival: "has seemed to be very much at a stop in these towns for a long time, and we are sensibly by little and little, more and more declining."³³

His prayers for renewed revival were now mixed with fears of its dangers. And, by 1739, both his prayers and his fears began to be realized, as word spread, throughout the American colonies, of a young Anglican minister named George Whitefield whose words were fanning the flames of a new revival on a scale that neither Edwards nor any of his contemporaries had ever before witnessed.

*The "Great Awakening"*³⁴

Although a familiar term for even the casual student of American history, the "Great Awakening" is markedly difficult to define. Certainly there had been other "awakenings" throughout the American religious experience, but the series of revivals that took place between roughly 1739 and 1743 took on a particular mythic quality among its participants that continues to resonate in contemporary historical scholarship and popular imagination.³⁵ Although many factors contributed to the popular understanding of these revivals as part of something of a different magnitude, two, in particular, stand out. First, as was mentioned above, Edwards's *Faithful Narrative* was circulating widely at this time, stirring up revivalist hopes and providing a common interpretive frame through which people could judge the events taking place in their own communities.³⁶ Secondly, the powerful preaching and effective publicity of George Whitefield helped to unite revivalist experiences as never before, creating a "common American experience" through which any community witnessing revival on any scale could feel connected to communities throughout the colonies and even across the world in a common, profound pouring out of God's spirit.³⁷ Thus, while the upheavals of the American Revolution were still nearly 35 years away, the commonly interpreted events of the "Great Awakening" mark an important early understanding of a united American identity.

And if the "Great Awakening" was the first American event, then George Whitefield was the first national "celebrity."³⁸ Reports of his successes in England and the southern colonies were widely circulating around New England by 1739. As a result, he was already massively popular by the time he first arrived in Rhode Island on September 14, 1740.³⁹ As news of Whitefield began reaching Edwards, he wrote to the itinerant preacher and invited him to preach at Northampton, saying, "I have a great desire, if it may be the will of God, that such a blessing as attends your person and labors may descend on this town, and may enter mine own house, and that I may receive it in my own soul."⁴⁰ Edwards saw Whitefield as God's answer to his prayers for renewal of the 1734-1735 revival. Whitefield, for his part, was familiar with Edwards, particularly through his *Faithful Narrative*, and eagerly agreed to the meeting. They met for the first time on October 17, 1740.⁴¹ During his four days in Northampton, Whitefield preached four times, provoking a powerful response in Edwards's congregation.⁴²

Although Whitefield and Edwards certainly respected each other, their intellectual and preaching capacities and their personal styles could hardly have been

more different. Whitefield was "a master of publicity"⁴³ who immersed himself in evangelism as a kind of consumer merchandise.⁴⁴ Like Solomon Stoddard, the twenty-four-year-old Whitefield was a gifted orator, and he preached, without notes, to the huge outdoor crowds that gathered to hear him speak. During his 45-day tour of Massachusetts and Connecticut, he preached over 175 sermons to thousands of men, women, and children.⁴⁵ By sloganeering "new birth" and "instant conversion," he introduced a new level of emotionalism to the sermon.⁴⁶ Additionally, he and his traveling companion, William Seward, sent letters to newspapers and community leaders detailing his ministerial successes and providing printed sermons and journal entries.⁴⁷ Along with these letters, he posted dates, times and locations for future sermons, turning his messages into media events of a kind the colonists had never before witnessed.⁴⁸

In contrast to Whitefield's dramatic performances, Edwards's preaching style was "dispassionate and calm,"⁴⁹ reflecting his refined character. Although he memorized his sermons, rather than reading from the text, Edwards would hold the manuscript in front of him while preaching and follow along with his finger.⁵⁰ Church members at Northampton noted his tendency to stare fixedly at the church's bell rope throughout the delivery of a sermon, never looking down at his congregation.⁵¹ In short, there was, in his style, "no display, no inflection, no consideration for the audience."⁵² Also, while Whitefield the evangelist promoted immediate and dramatic conversions with little concern for the long-term effects of salvation, Edwards held on to the traditional Puritan concerns for individual transformation through genuine conversion that would bring about a lifelong growth of grace in the life of the believer and, in turn, reform community standards.

Although Whitefield helped motivate the religious revivals that Edwards had been praying for since 1735, the blessing came at the cost of diminished authority and control of ministers over their congregations. The emotional core of the "Great Awakening" was found in itinerant preaching, rather than the work of pastors among their own churches. Even the *Sinners* sermon did not inspire its famous emotional reaction when Edwards first delivered it at Northampton. It was not until he spoke as an itinerant to the congregation at Enfield that the people were swept up in emotional fervor.⁵³ The itinerant emphasis had the effect of both "nationalizing" and decentering the revival.

Through these effects, the revivals of the "Great Awakening" helped bring about change in the authority structure of religious life in America. By speaking out against "lukewarm" and unconverted ministers and challenging church members to hold their religious leaders accountable before God, Whitefield encouraged an increasing individualism in religion, authorizing people to challenge the authority of their ministers.⁵⁴ Ministers "could no longer be trusted as a class," leaving it up to laity to decide for themselves on the basis of individual morality.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the preaching of other revivalists, such as Gilbert Tennent and James Davenport, further extended the democratizing influence of Whitefield's messages. Tennent's famous sermon, *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry*—delivered on March 8, 1740—encouraged people to directly challenge ministerial authority.⁵⁶ Davenport went further than either

Whitefield or Tennent when he condemned unconverted ministers by name and encouraged congregations to avoid religious services if their spiritual leaders did not show sufficient evidence of salvation.⁵⁷ His incendiary preaching became the representative example, among anti-revivalists, of the uncontrolled emotionalism revivalism could produce. The result of these messages was the steady disintegration of unquestionable ministerial authority.

Although he remained committed to and supportive of the "Great Awakening," Edwards was troubled by these developments.⁵⁸ He valued the laity and human emotion, but he refused to accept emotion divorced from educated and authoritative ministers, remaining throughout his life both a revivalist and a child of the Puritans.⁵⁹ He "deplored the hysteria"⁶⁰ of the revivals and worried about the results of widespread challenges to ministerial authority even while supporting revivalism as the work of God. Throughout the time Whitefield was in and around Northampton, Edwards counseled him to concentrate on the Scriptures and not to rely on the leadings of God's spirit and mystical "impulses from above."⁶¹ Edwards was undoubtedly afraid that such emotionalism would result in waves of false conversions that would further fracture the relationship between ministers and laity.⁶² Having witnessed the tragic effects of uncontrolled emotion during his own revival, Edwards became increasingly determined to maintain the divinely appointed, hierarchically oriented authority of ministers within their churches.

Coming at the height of revivalistic fervor, the sermon Edwards later published as *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*—first delivered in June of 1741 at Northampton and repeated, more famously, on July 8, 1741 at Enfield—is a perfect representation of the tensions between reason and emotion, authoritarianism and populism that marked Edwards's thinking and concerns in response to the revival. At Northampton, Edwards preached the sermon "without interruption" and ended with a pastoral call for his people to recognize their need and seek after Christ.⁶³ A month later, at Enfield, Edwards's itinerant preaching reduced the congregation to loud wailing and crying that very likely drowned out the quiet voice of the preacher before he could even arrive at his hopeful conclusion.⁶⁴ At one point, Edwards, always concerned with excessive or immoderate emotion, paused and asked the congregation to "restrain their groans and weeping so that he could continue."⁶⁵

In *Sinners*, Edwards did work to inspire terror, but inspiring terror for its own sake was not his goal.⁶⁶ The fear is designed to lead his listeners, systematically and authoritatively, to repent and humble themselves before the grace of a loving God in the hope of obtaining the joy of salvation.⁶⁷ However, while deeply rooted in the Puritan conception of absolute authority, *Sinners* both challenged and promoted an individualistic pietism. It represented a powerful attempt by the greatest American theologian to integrate the new world with the old—melding science and Scripture, divine sovereignty and human choice—in an attempt to hold together a society that was dividing reason and emotion and alienating divinely appointed ministers from the people they were called to instruct.

Sinners at Enfield

The reasoning is plain, simple, and directed at a community that had, up to this time, conspicuously resisted the revivalist fervor that had engulfed most of the rest of the Connecticut Valley.⁶⁸ The format is conventional, a structure adapted from the Puritan sermon and only slightly modified by Edwards. It began with the Text, a short passage of Scripture, followed by a brief historical and contextual framing, which serves as a basis for the analysis that follows.⁶⁹ The Doctrine comes next, which presented the sermon's argument, mechanically divided into propositions and reasons.⁷⁰ Finally, the Application presents the Doctrine from a different perspective, and integrates the sermon into the life and the immediate situation of the audience.⁷¹ Working within this structure, Edwards moved his listeners to look on their condition from three different perspectives: 1) The human on earth, 2) The divine in heaven, and 3) The damned in hell.

Edwards wove together knowledge of the self and the knowledge of God, an approach that drew on his Calvinist and Puritan roots.⁷² Moving from the disorder of human knowledge to the perfect orderliness of God and back again, Edwards finished by metaphorically dropping his listeners into the ultimate disorder and despair of hell, before offering them an opportunity to repent and turn to Christ. Throughout the sermon, Edwards foregrounded God as merciful and longsuffering—even passive—and left the listener with no doubt that it is human sin and sin alone that dragged the sinner down to hell.

After identifying and situating the sermon text, Edwards began broadly with knowledge of the human (the "self" in a universal sense). Speaking at first of a generic "they," Edwards invited his listeners to focus on the ultimate fate of unredeemed humanity—destruction. He briefly outlined the main points of his argument and identified the depth of humanity's despair without Christ. First, they have *no security*. At any moment destruction might overcome them: "As he that walks in slippery places is every moment liable to fall" (3).⁷³ Secondly, they have *no excuse*. Edwards here rejected any notion of God pushing or casting sinners into hell. Those that fell, fell through the weight of their own sin—an image that called to mind both the burdened Christian in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (published a little over sixty years before Edwards delivered this sermon) and the Apostle Paul, who compared sin to a body of death and begged for deliverance.⁷⁴ Thirdly, these unregenerate have *no power*. They are, willingly or not, dependent on the will of God, who held them up for a time, but for no other reason than his own pleasure. And finally, they have *no hope*. Edwards concluded his introduction of the text with the word "lost" (6). Once God released his hand, the powerless unregenerate will inevitably fall beyond all hope of saving. Newton's new science of gravity is at work throughout this sermon, as an irresistible force of nature that pulled sinners to their own destruction. Edwards, who had been interested in the physical sciences as a youth, never abandoned those interests, but integrated them into his pastoral duties, using the physical world to illustrate divine truths in his sermons.⁷⁵

Building on this knowledge of the human condition, Edwards shifted to the Doctrine section and the knowledge of God, contrasting the divine power with human

powerlessness. First, God is *powerful*. He could crush any and all enemies, and he held fallen humanity over hell by "a slender thread" (12)—a foreshadowing of the famous spider metaphor that formed the climax of the sermon. Secondly, God is *just*, and in his justice, he had already passed judgment. Those who were not with him were against him, and those who stood against him had already condemned themselves. Edwards was again careful here not to implicate God in unnecessary cruelty: "Every unconverted man properly belongs to hell; that is his place; from thence he is" (14). Hell was not unnatural punishment for Edwards but the natural home of those who rejected Christ. Humans were naturally the enemies of God,⁷⁶ and God, in turn, was in the process of righting disparities and restoring all things to their proper order. For Edwards, as for the Enlightenment thinkers, the truths of faith and reason were one.⁷⁷ God is identified with ultimate order and rationality, and the unregenerate continued to exist against all laws of nature and only because the God of mercy held them back for a short time. It is only the hand of God that prevented the natural laws from dragging fallen humanity into eternal damnation. And Edwards intended this restraint to appear all the more remarkable because he argued that, thirdly, God is *angry*. His sword is drawn, his fire is ready, but he—in his infinite patience and mercy—had chosen to wait.

As Edwards spoke of the patience of God it momentarily lifted the tone of his sermon, which had, until now, been steadily emphasizing the desperate condition in which the unregenerate found themselves. At this moment the listener is lifted up to the height of God's perspective in order to survey the "souls of wicked men" below (18). From this perspective of infinite wisdom and goodness, hell is not a place; it is evil unrestrained. God is not throwing the wicked into hell; he is holding hell back to allow a little more time for the unredeemed to seek after Christ and salvation. Throughout this section, Edwards repeated the word "if." If God did not restrain the wicked, they would make all things hell.

Speaking to a congregation of both saints and sinners, Edwards's intention was to comfort those who were already saved while forcing all others to consider their state. For Edwards, it was not enough to frighten the congregation, because "sinners fear only for their already damned selves."⁷⁸ What was needed was a change in perspective. The sinner must come to a proper knowledge of God and the self, and understand not merely the nature, but the *excellence* of the divine plan. This occurred when the listener identified God as the sovereign totality. For Edwards, no human analogy was sufficient to describe the divine and God was not properly equivalent to "father" or "sovereign" or any other human figure; he was the ground of reality, and reality, in turn, was an extension of the mind of God, recreated every moment from nothing.⁷⁹ For Edwards, it was not simply that God represented all that was considered "good" or "just" but that it was only his nature that gave these concepts meaning. Therefore, only once the sinner came to recognize the justice of his or her own damnation, could salvation come. When that occurred: "it is not oneself one damns, but one's old, unregenerate self, for conversion has already occurred."⁸⁰ As Edwards said, "In those in whom awakenings seem to have a saving issue, commonly the first thing that appears after their legal troubles is a conviction of the justice of God in their condemnation."⁸¹

In this sense, Edwards's sermons were never concerned with persuading sinners to come to Christ or accept salvation. For the Calvinist and the Puritan, only the arbitrary election of God determined who would be saved. Instead, it was the act of setting God before the congregation that represented the minister's ultimate duty. The knowledge of God destroyed apathy and shattered human comfort, preparing the way for the divine work of salvation. Fear served as a means to this end rather than the goal. Fear did not condemn; it gave reason for the sinner to hope, and while there was fear the hope remained that the sinner's fear of damnation may yet become the proper fear of God.⁸² Looking down from the divine perspective, the redeemed in the congregation could recognize and rejoice in the mercy and orderliness of a loving God, who restrained the wicked from fully embracing their wickedness and making all of creation into hell. According to Edwards, God was justifiably angry because the unregenerate squandered his blessings and refused to acknowledge him. However, God's mercy was great, and, taking the first step in human salvation,⁸³ he chose to give the unredeemed a chance to repent.

But, this chance, like the rest Edwards offered his listeners, was short, because there was no security. In points seven through ten, Edwards returned his listeners to the world of human knowledge, now appearing all the more grotesque after they have experienced the ultimate rationality and mercy of God. Edwards explored the foolishness of human attempts to find order and security outside of divine grace. He reemphasized that there was no security in human wisdom, because the wise man and the fool both die in the same way (20). There was no security in contrivance, because death was all around and could come at any moment (21). And finally, there was no security in God outside of Christ, because: "God has laid himself under *no obligation*, by any promise to keep any natural man out of hell one moment" (23). From above, Edwards believed, God was merciful, orderly, and patient, but from below, he was incomprehensible, unpredictable, and terrifying. Having seen the wicked from God's perspective, the listeners could now understand how the justice of God is maintained by allowing these wicked sinners to fall into the hell they have made for themselves.

Moving from Doctrine to Application,⁸⁴ Edwards shifted from the general to the frighteningly personal. He demanded that each individual search his or her own life in comparison with the absolute standards of God. He addressed the members of the congregation directly: "That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone, is extended abroad under you" (26). Having carefully presented the laws of sin and damnation as absolute, natural, and non-negotiable, any listener who was not already redeemed would be left without excuse, held up undeservedly by the mercy of an angry God who might at any moment release his hold and let the laws of nature pull the sinner down to destruction.

At this point Edwards's carefully ordered patterns and lists of numbered points briefly broke down into apparent randomness.⁸⁵ Rather than the ordered purpose of a world controlled by God's will and made bearable by God's restraining hand, the unregenerate were now presented with a world of insecurity—wandering in a deadly fog where they could not perceive the dangers and "don't see the hand of God" (27). First, they were in danger *from the earth*: "Were it not for the sovereign pleasure of

God, the earth would not bear you one moment; for you are a burden to it" (28). Secondly, they were in danger *from God*, and having seen the barely restrained wrath of God from God's own perspective, the unredeemed listeners were encouraged to fully realize the terror of their position. Thirdly, in case it was not already clear, they were in danger *from themselves* and any false sense of security they might maintain: "However you may have reformed your life in many things, and may have had religious affections . . . 'tis nothing but [God's] meer pleasure that keeps you from being this moment swallowed up in everlasting destruction" (31).

As the fog cleared, the sermon reached its famous climax, and the terrified sinners were presented to themselves as loathsome spiders being held over an eternal fire by an all-powerful, arbitrary, and brutally wrathful God. Having now fully arrived at the knowledge of God and the knowledge of self—having seen God in all his glory and humanity in all its wickedness—the listeners were finally, if only for a moment, able fully to appreciate both the hideousness of their character and dreadful precariousness of their position. "O sinner" (34)! Edwards called out, as if offering one last chance at salvation; and yet, in a terrifying gesture of finality, he let go. "You have no interest in any mediator," he said, "And nothing . . . nothing . . . nothing . . . nothing . . . nothing" (34).

The steady beat of the words simulated the final fall, as God released his hand, and the spider dropped into the eternal flame.

The hell that Edwards presented to his audience is shockingly human and personal, the ultimate extension of earthly suffering and misery. The power of this vision lies not so much in the vividness of Edwards's language as in his ability to make hell a deeply isolated and individualistic experience. We can, as one author has said, visit Dante's hell with some pleasure and detachment, both because the poet provides companions for the journey and because we always know, on some level, that this place belongs to Dante. Edwards, on the other hand, personalized hell for his listeners and made each individual responsible for his or her damnation.⁸⁶ Having seen the wretchedness of humanity from above, the listeners were now forced to confront the unbridled wrath of God from below. Having understood the perspective of divine order and mercy, they were left without excuse. To the end, God was not implicated in the consignment of sinners to hell.

Once in hell, however, the merciful, orderly, and restraining God transformed into a hellish distortion of his former character. Where before, God is passive—holding back the chaos of human wickedness—in hell, he unleashed that wickedness upon the sinner with seemingly demonic glee. As he did at the beginning of the sermon, Edwards first described the power of God, but here God no longer dams the waters or restrains the sword. All the power that was formerly directed at restraining wickedness is now turned toward the eternal torture of the wicked. Secondly, Edwards described the fierceness of this wrath. Thirdly, he detailed the misery of the damned, deliberately warping reality as he explained the hellish abomination. Edwards compared God to the wicked King Nebuchadnezzar from the book of Daniel (40). Indeed, from the depths of hellfire, God and Nebuchadnezzar would naturally appear the same. The warped

judgment of the damned—who can no longer even distinguish between good and evil—only emphasized and added to their misery.

In hell, God did not merely permit the suffering of sinners, nor did he only observe their torment. Instead, God actively participated in the eternal punishment of the wicked: "He will crush you under his feet without mercy; he'll crush out your blood, and make it fly, and it shall be sprinkled on his garments" (39). As Edward Gallagher says, "To be brutally blunt, the content of this segment of the Application demonstrates that God is a killer."⁸⁷ There is no order, no law, no meaning—only remorse and regret and never-ending agony at the hands of the formerly merciful God who has now become the eternal torturer, trampling down sinners "as the mire of the streets" (39). Finally, to seal the terror of this place in the minds of the unregenerate, Edwards described the eternity of hell's punishment: "When you look forward, you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you . . . and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all" (42).

However, unlike hell, the sermon does not end in torment and misery. Edwards, the pastor, offers his congregation one more chance to act on their fear and fall before the mercy of an angry God. He encouraged the redeemed to consider hell as the possible fate of their friends and neighbors: "We know not who they are, or in what seats they sit, or what thoughts they now have . . . If we knew that there was one person, and but one, in the whole congregation that was to be the subject of this misery, what an awful thing would it be to think of" (43)! He pleaded with the unregenerate to heed the warning and turn to Christ: "What would not those poor damned, hopeless souls give for one day's such opportunity as you now enjoy" (43)! "And now you have an extraordinary opportunity," Edwards said, "a day wherein CHRIST has flung the door of mercy wide open . . . a day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God" (44).

Nor does he merely depend on the terrors of hell to frighten his congregation into salvation. He also offered them the earthly advantages. He appealed to "local pride" by comparing Enfield to a neighboring town (44),⁸⁸ and explained the benefits of salvation as an extension of local community. They would not be alone in following Christ's call. Many others had gone before them. In particular, he commended the young people of Enfield to follow their peers. After the agonizing alienation of hell—where every tortured soul is isolated from human and divine comfort—Edwards reminded his listeners that they would not be alone if they accepted Christ. Only those who continued in sin were alienated—even in this world—blinded to the truth of God and deprived of the joy that so many others are experiencing.

The sermon ended in the human world, but now a world populated with the true knowledge of God—his perspective and his order. Edwards's final line was a call to look back on the depths of damnation through which they have traveled (49)—leaving the valley of hell and returning to the mountain heights of the divine perspective, the heights from which the hope of salvation could be properly understood and embraced.⁸⁹ In the midst of the sermon's terror, Edwards's most consistent theme is hope: Hope that God may yet show mercy, hope that order and justice will triumph, and hope for a better community founded on the strength of individual commitment to God in Christ.

The Legacy

It was not long after Edwards preached at Enfield that revivalism began to dissipate,⁹⁰ and the steadily increasing tensions among ministers over the nature and meaning of the revivals broke out into public denouncement and heated dispute. After more than a century of essential unity, the New England clerics split amongst themselves, separating into the "Old Lights"—who opposed the revivals as disruptive and questioned their value in promoting the Christian life and virtues—and the "New Lights," for whom the revivals were part of a great pouring out of the spirit of God.⁹¹ New England minister Charles Chauncy became the chief spokesperson for the Old Lights and Edwards became the chief spokesperson for the other side, publishing three different texts defending the revivals.⁹² Meanwhile the extremism of itinerant ministers, and particularly that of James Davenport, became easy targets for critics like Chauncy who wished to point out the socially disruptive potential of revivalism.⁹³

Eventually, clergy on opposite sides of the debate began attacking each other so viciously that their congregations felt justified in separating from them.⁹⁴ The office of minister was no longer sufficient in itself to command respect and allegiance.⁹⁵ By the spring of 1743, the energy of the "Great Awakening" was irreversibly dissolving.⁹⁶ Revivals were increasingly isolated and the sense of united participation in a great work of God began to fade. By the time Whitefield returned to New England in 1744, there was no longer any hope of renewing the revival enthusiasm.⁹⁷

It is generally agreed that Edwards and his contemporary proponents and interpreters of the "Great Awakening" revivals helped sow the seeds for the American Revolution. Preaching that emphasized the sovereignty of God helped to equalize human relations and denaturalize the claims of human authority.⁹⁸ Increasingly alienated from the claims of an authoritative clerical establishment, the laity-driven revivals also signaled the final end of the utopian "City upon a Hill"—the original Puritan ideal for a properly ordered society—based on a divinely preordained and immutable hierarchy of community roles. Instead, an increasing investment in individuals and individual happiness led to a decreasing satisfaction with the political control of spirituality and the close intimacy between the church and civil government.⁹⁹ This dissatisfaction, among other effects, helped pave the way for the establishment and free-exercise clauses in the American Constitution. In the years that followed, this increasingly individualistic and anti-hierarchical perspective also led to critiques of the political establishment and the British monarchy. Therefore, it is not surprising that the audience to whom Edwards preached in New England included some of the first to call for disassociation from English authority.¹⁰⁰

The norms of American religion were changing as well. Itinerancy became increasingly prevalent among evangelical ministers in the early nineteenth century, another mark of American individualism.¹⁰¹ The authority of the traditional denominations continued to diminish, and increasingly individualistic denominations, like the Baptists and Methodists, began expanding throughout the colonies.¹⁰² Between 1742 and 1750, Massachusetts and Connecticut had 77 "illegal separations" in which lay

members broke completely from their congregations and established new churches led by lay ministers who often lacked any of the formal training or recognized authorization that had established ministerial authority in the past.¹⁰³ Many of these churches adopted the writings of Jonathan Edwards for their own purposes, helping to establish his posthumous reputation as one of the great theologians of American evangelicalism while simultaneously reducing his status among the mainline congregations, who opposed the emotionalism and individualism of the evangelistic sects.

Edwards himself, after *Sinners*, would remain nearly ten more years at Northampton, but his departure from that congregation was not a happy one. More and more concerned with his diminishing authority as a minister in his congregation and community, Edwards imposed increasingly stricter rules and restrictions.¹⁰⁴ Eventually, the people rebelled and, in 1750, voted Edwards out of office. In 1751, he moved to Stockbridge and worked as minister to the native peoples in that area.¹⁰⁵ It was during this time that he produced some of his most enduring theological texts, but he never returned to a pulpit like the one he had left. In 1757, Edwards accepted a call to serve as the President of the College of New Jersey—later renamed Princeton—but he died of a smallpox inoculation on March 22, 1758, just after assuming his new duties.¹⁰⁶

As with all men and women whose impact still resonates in our own experience, it is tempting to reinterpret the strangeness and distance of Edwards in a way that renders him "familiar."¹⁰⁷ Intellectual historians, philosophers, and contemporary Christian evangelicals have all variously sought to claim him as one of their own, but the irresolvable tensions in Edwards's life and work continue to keep such efforts in their place. Despite moments of apparent familiarity, Jonathan Edwards will always remain a frustratingly elusive and fascinatingly strange figure. From his earliest days in pastoral ministry, Edwards viewed himself as a champion for righteousness, perhaps even the greatest of his generation,¹⁰⁸ caught in an eschatological struggle between Christ and the devil for the souls of his congregation, his community, and the rest of the world;¹⁰⁹ however, he was also a champion of the laity,¹¹⁰ whose revivalism helped to promote the historically unprecedented democratization of American religion.¹¹¹ He was both self-righteous and self-deprecating. He strove to maintain his authority as minister while diminishing himself. He worked to bring sinners to repentance while doctrinally committed to the bondage of the human will. His writing was cut short by his untimely death, leaving far too many questions unanswered and theories swirling around an evidential void. What if Edwards had finished the doctrinal *magnum opus* he had begun before he died? What if he had stayed at Northampton? What if he had lived to see the beginning of the Revolution? Ultimately, however, we must believe that Edwards would neither have expected nor wanted such tensions resolved in this world. Whatever else we may say of Jonathan Edwards, it is certain that he always lived prepared to die, believing that the questions and tensions and insecurities of this present life would one day be swallowed up and forgotten in the eternal light of glory.

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and Martin J. Medhurst for their guidance, suggestions, and support throughout this project.

Notes

1 The title of Jonathan Edwards' speech, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, is italicized because the version authenticated for this unit is based on a published pamphlet of the speech that circulated shortly after he delivered the speech in Enfield, Massachusetts (now Connecticut).

2 Clarence Darrow, "The Edwardses and the Jukeses," *American Mercury* 6, no. 22 (October 1925): 153.

3 Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703-1758: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1941), 193. In fact, it was not until the late nineteenth century that *Sinners* became such a notorious text. In earlier biographies it is mentioned, if at all, only in the context of Edwards's other successful sermons. See: Robert Lee Stuart, "Jonathan Edwards at Enfield: 'and Oh the Cheerfulness and Pleasantness...,'" *American Literature* 48, no. 1 (1976): 47-48.

4 Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703-1758: A Biography*, 28.

5 George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 110. Edwin S. Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England* (New York: Harper, 1957), 17.

6 Jonathan Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton, and the Neighboring Towns and Villages of the County or Hampshire, in the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay in New-England," in *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 4, the Great Awakening*, ed., C. C. Goen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972; orig. pub. 1737), 146.

7 Eugene E. White, "Solomon Stoddard's Theories of Persuasion," *Speech Monographs* 29, no. 4 (November 1962): 236.

8 White, "Solomon Stoddard's," 249. Stoddard's revivalist innovations can be best understood as an extension of historical developments in Puritan doctrine and practice. By the 1650s, in New England, average church membership was down to less than half of a community's population, a serious problem for a society whose social and religious life were so integrated. Therefore, in 1662, a "half-way covenant" was introduced allowing third-generation children of "outward" members—those who had been baptized but shown no definitive signs of personal salvation—to be admitted into partial membership and allowed to present their own children for baptism. This changed the structure of the Puritan congregation, so that ministers were forced to prepare sermons with an appreciation that they were likely addressing both saved and unsaved members. See: Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 58. Eugene E. White, "Puritan Preaching and the Authority of God," in *Preaching in American History: Selected Issues in the American Pulpit, 1630-1967*, ed., DeWitte Holland (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1969), 54-55.

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- 9 White, "Solomon Stoddard's Theories of Persuasion," 252.
- 10 Stoddard did not carry revivalist conceptions of grace as far as Edwards did. In particular, he was unwilling to relinquish any ministerial control to the laity, and insisted on more control of the salvation process as a result. See: Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England*, 163. David Laurence, "Jonathan Edwards, Solomon Stoddard, and the Preparationist Model of Conversion," *The Harvard Theological Review* 72, no. 3/4 (July - October 1979).
- 11 White, "Puritan Preaching and the Authority of God," 56.
- 12 White, "Solomon Stoddard's Theories of Persuasion," 258.
- 13 Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative," 146.
- 14 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 133.
- 15 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 133.
- 16 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 39.
- 17 Patricia J. Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor: Religion and Society in Eighteenth Century Northampton* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 71.
- 18 Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards*, 106.
- 19 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 11, 119.
- 20 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 120.
- 21 Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative," 147-48.
- 22 Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative," 147.
- 23 Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative," 149.
- 24 Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England*, 188; and Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative," 152.
- 25 Jonathan Edwards, "Letter: To the Reverend Benjamin Colman: May 30, 1735," in *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 16, Letters and Personal Writings*, ed., C. C. Goen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 53.
- 26 Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative," 161, 69.
- 27 Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative," 190. Edwards identified his revival with those his grandfather had led.
- 28 Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative," 206.
- 29 Edwards, "Letter: To the Reverend Benjamin Colman: May 30, 1735," 58. Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative," 206.
- 30 Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative," 206.
- 31 Jonathan Edwards, "Letter: To the Reverend Benjamin Colman: May 19, 1737," in *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 16, Letters and Personal Writings*, ed., C. C. Goen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 68.
- 32 Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards*, 118.
- 33 Edwards, "Letter: To the Reverend Benjamin Colman: May 19, 1737," 67.
- 34 Throughout the text, I have placed this term within quotation marks, in order to emphasize and remind readers of its status as an interpreted event.
- 35 Timothy D. Hall, *Contested Boundaries: Itinerancy and the Reshaping of the Colonial American Religious World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994); and

Frank Lambert, *Inventing the Great Awakening* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

36 Cf. Lambert, *Inventing the Great Awakening*.

37 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 209.

38 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 205.

39 Eugene E. White, "The Preaching of George Whitefield During the Great Awakening in America," *Speech Monographs* 15, no. 1 (1948): 33.

40 Jonathan Edwards, "Letter: To the Reverend George Whitefield, February 12, 1739/40," in *Letters and Personal Writings*, vol. 16, ed., C. C. Goen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 80.

41 Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703-1758: A Biography*, 186.

42 Ava Chamberlain, "The Grand Sower of the Seed: Jonathan Edwards's Critique of George Whitefield," *The New England Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (1997): 368. Jonathan Edwards, "Letter: To the Reverend George Whitefield, December 14, 1740," in *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 16, Letters and Personal Writings*, ed., C. C. Goen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 87.

43 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 202. Whitefield's most prominent promoter was Benjamin Franklin, with whom Whitefield enjoyed a long and mutually beneficial friendship, with Whitefield gathering larger and more diverse crowds and Franklin selling more newspapers. See: Frank Lambert, "'Pedlar in Divinity': George Whitefield and the Great Awakening," *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 3 (1990): 821.

44 Lambert, "'Pedlar in Divinity,'" 812.

45 Stout, *The New England Soul*, 190.

46 Eugene E. White, *Puritan Rhetoric: The Issue of Emotion in Religion* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 51.

47 White, "The Preaching of George Whitefield During the Great Awakening in America," 36.

48 White, "The Preaching of George Whitefield During the Great Awakening in America."

49 Clyde A. Holbrook, *The Ethics of Jonathan Edwards: Morality and Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973), 11.

50 Sandra M. Gustafson, *Eloquence Is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 62.

51 Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards*, 83.

52 Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: W. Sloane Associates, 1949), 51.

53 Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703-1758: A Biography*, 190.

54 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 211; and Stout, *The New England Soul*, 194.

55 Stout, *The New England Soul*, 199.

56 Stout, *The New England Soul*, 199.

57 White, *Puritan Rhetoric: The Issue of Emotion in Religion*, 53.

58 Jonathan Edwards, "Letter: To Deacon Moses Lyman: August 31, 1741," in *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 16, Letters and Personal Writings*, ed., C. C. Goen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972).

59 Chamberlain, "The Grand Sower of the Seed: Jonathan Edwards's Critique of George Whitefield," 384. Jonathan Edwards, "The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God," in *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 4, the Great Awakening*, ed., C. C. Goen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972; orig. pub. 1741), 282. Edward M. Collins, Jr., "The Rhetoric of Sensation Challenges the Rhetoric of Intellect: An Eighteenth-Century Controversy," in *Preaching in American History: Selected Issues in the American Pulpit, 1630-1967*, ed., DeWitte Holland (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1969), 108, 16-17. Jonathan Edwards, "Letter: To the Rev. Thomas Prince of Boston," in *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 4, the Great Awakening*, ed., C. C. Goen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972; orig. pub. 12 December 1743).

60 Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards*, 137.

61 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 212.

62 The "magnitude of Whitefield's triumph" in Edwards's pulpit has led to scholarly speculation that, in private, Edwards might also have resented Whitefield for his oratorical skill and popularity. See: Chamberlain, "The Grand Sower of the Seed: Jonathan Edwards's Critique of George Whitefield," 369.

63 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 224; and Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703-1758: A Biography*, 191.

64 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 224.

65 Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England*, 48. This should not be taken as an indication that Edwards was displeased by the emotional reaction. In his *Distinguishing Marks*, Edwards argued that, generally speaking, outward emotions should not be encouraged, but that those emotions, though disruptive, that break forth from a sincere heart should not be suppressed. See: Edwards, "The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God," 267.

66 For Edwards, warning against hellfire was as natural as warning a family that their house was on fire. "If I am in danger of going to hell," he said, "I should be glad to know as much as possibly I can of the dreadfulness of it ... he does me the best kindness, that does most to represent to me the truth of the case, that sets forth my misery and danger in the liveliest manner." See: Edwards, "The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God," 247.

67 Stout, *The New England*, 229.

68 Edwin H. Cady, "The Artistry of Jonathan Edwards," *The New England Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (1949): 62.

69 Stephen R. Yarbrough and John C. Adams, *Delightful Conviction: Jonathan Edwards and the Rhetoric of Conversion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 29.

70 Yarbrough and Adams, *Delightful Conviction*, 29.

71 Wilson H. Kimnach, "The Brazen Trumpet: Jonathan Edwards's Conception of the Sermon," in *Critical Essays on Jonathan Edwards*, ed., William J. Scheick (Boston,

MA: G. K. Hall, 1980), 278. Yarbrough and Adams, *Delightful Conviction: Jonathan Edwards and the Rhetoric of Conversion*, 29.

72 In the Calvinist tradition, the knowledge of God and the self function as opposite sides of the same coin. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin argued that human beings can gain knowledge of themselves only through the knowledge of God, and a knowledge of God can develop only as we come to a true knowledge and understanding of ourselves, our nature, and our destiny. Only as people come to appreciate their precarious position before an omnipotent and sovereign deity can they properly understand their own nature as helpless human subjects who are completely dependent on the grace and mercy of God. And only then will they respond with true and lasting conversions that avoid deadly false assurances of human acceptability. See: John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed., John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.1.1; Holbrook, *The Ethics of Jonathan Edwards: Morality and Aesthetics*, 5; John H. Gerstner, *Steps to Salvation: The Evangelistic Message of Jonathan Edwards* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1959), 57.

73 Here and elsewhere passages in *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* are cited with reference to paragraph numbers in the text of the speech that accompanies this essay.

74 Romans 7:24.

75 Christopher Lukasik, "Feeling the Force of Certainty: The Divine Science, Newtonianism, and Jonathan Edwards's 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God'," *The New England Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (2000): 230.

76 Harold P. Simonson, *Jonathan Edwards: Theologian of the Heart* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 125.

77 Gerald R. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 219.

78 Yarbrough and Adams, *Delightful Conviction: Jonathan Edwards and the Rhetoric of Conversion*, 13.

79 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 74.

80 Yarbrough and Adams, *Delightful Conviction*, 49.

81 Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative," 168.

82 Yarbrough and Adams, *Delightful Conviction*, 56.

83 Gerstner, *Steps to Salvation*, 18.

84 Wilson Kimnach argues, based on research of the available manuscripts, that the final three-sevenths of the sermon were altered, perhaps significantly, between its initial presentation and its publication, a situation that renders indeterminate any analysis or interpretation of the original oratorical moment. See: Wilson H. Kimnach, ed., "General Introduction to the Sermons: Jonathan Edwards' Art of Prophesying," in *Sermons and Discourses 1720-1723*, vol. 10, Works of Jonathan Edwards (Quoted in: Christopher Grasso, "Images and Shadows of Jonathan Edwards," *American Literary History* 8, no. 4 (1996): 689.)

85 Edward J. Gallagher, "'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God': Some Unfinished Business," *The New England Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (2000): 211.

86 Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703-1758: A Biography*, 193.

87 Gallagher, "'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God': Some Unfinished Business," 212.

88 Edwin H. Cady, "The Artistry of Jonathan Edwards," *Ibid.* 22, no. 1 (1949): 70.

89 Cf. Stuart, "Jonathan Edwards at Enfield: 'and Oh the Cheerfulness and Pleasantness...,'" 58.

90 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 230.

91 Cf. Edwards, "The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God," 241.

92 Collins, "The Rhetoric of Sensation Challenges the Rhetoric of Intellect: An Eighteenth-Century Controversy," 99.

93 Collins, "The Rhetoric of Sensation Challenges the Rhetoric of Intellect: An Eighteenth-Century Controversy," 99. Davenport condemned nearly all the ministers along the Connecticut coast, encouraged insubordination at Yale by telling students not to attend required chapel services, and even promoted book burnings as a way of separating the laity from sinful churches and their leaders. See: Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 232-33, 75.

94 Jonathan Edwards, "Letter: To the Rev. James Robe of Kilsyth, Scotland," in *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 4, the Great Awakening*, ed., C. C. Goen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972; orig. pub. 12 May 1743).

95 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 280.

96 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 277.

97 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 308.

98 Frederic I. Carpenter, "The Radicalism of Jonathan Edwards," *The New England Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (October 1931): 644. White, *Puritan Rhetoric: The Issue of Emotion in Religion*, 57.

99 Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England*, 110.

100 Carpenter, "The Radicalism of Jonathan Edwards," 644.

101 Randall Balmer, *Blessed Assurance: A History of Evangelicalism in America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999), 65.

102 White, *Puritan Rhetoric: The Issue of Emotion in Religion*, 58.

103 Stout, *The New England Soul*, 208-09.

104 Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards*, 147.

105 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 375.

106 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 431.

107 David D. Hall, "Jonathan Edwards in His Time, and in Ours," Book Review, *Modern Intellectual History* 1, no. 3 (2004): 387-390.

108 Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 60, 200.

109 Christopher R. Reaske, "The Devil and Jonathan Edwards," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 33, no. 1 (January - March 1972): 138; and W. Clark Gilpin, "'Inward, Sweet Delight in God': Solitude in the Career of Jonathan Edwards," *The Journal of Religion* 82, no. 4 (2002): 527.

110 Stout, *The New England Soul*, 203.

111 Stout, *The New England Soul*, 205-07.

Edwards, Jonathan, 1703-1758. Publication date. 1920. Topics. Future punishment. Publisher. Philadelphia : Presbyterian Board of Publication. Collection. Sinners in the Hands elan Angry God preaching to seek the God that they had been avoiding for so long. On July 8, 1741, filled, as usual, with a profound sense of the heinousness of sin, Jonathan Edwards preached America's most famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," to that congregation at Enfield. His aim was to bring his listeners to at least some realization of the horror of their state: they were objects of God's great displeasure, for they had offended and outraged Him by turning away from His incredible goodness in intervening for their salvation. " The famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" by Jonathon Edwards was delivered on July 8, 1741 in Enfield, Connecticut and is considered by many to be the most famous sermon ever given in America. It was published soon after and was an immediate commercial success.Â Length: 27 pages26 minutes. Description. The famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" by Jonathon Edwards was delivered on July 8, 1741 in Enfield, Connecticut and is considered by many to be the most famous sermon ever given in America. It was published soon after and was an immediate commercial success.Â God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards (With the Complete Text of The End for Which God Created the World). Author John Piper.