

# from Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

Sermon by Jonathan Edwards

## What keeps you IN LINE?

A sense of right and wrong probably keeps you from cheating on a test. But there are other reasons for behaving morally. Some people are anxious to please. Others fear the consequences of misbehavior. The Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards uses fear to get his point across in the sermon you're about to read.

**ROLE-PLAY** With a partner, take turns role-playing a conversation with a young child who has been stealing. Your mission is to persuade him or her to stop. Before you begin, consider how best to keep the child in line. For example, you might threaten or shame the child, or appeal to his or her pride.

*Be Good, or Else...!*

Appeal to Fear: \_\_\_\_\_

Accept all reasonable responses. \_\_\_\_\_

Appeal to Shame: \_\_\_\_\_

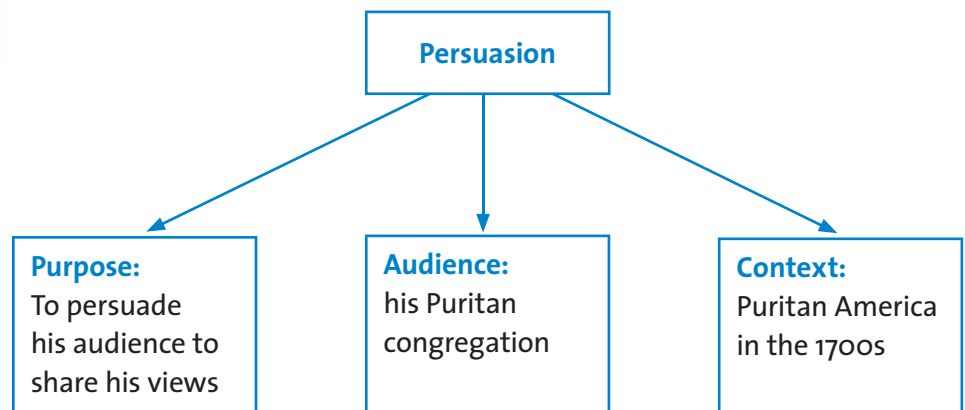
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Appeal to Pride: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Text Analysis: Persuasion

Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards was skilled at the art of **persuasion**. Persuasive writing is shaped by the **author's purpose, audience, and context**. The chart shows how these factors influenced the writing of Edwards's sermon.



As you read Edwards's sermon, look for passages that reveal how context, audience, and purpose affect the tone of his sermon. Note the biblical **allusions**, or references to people, events, or places from the Bible, that make his writing powerful and persuasive.

## Reading Strategy: Analyze Emotional Appeals

**Emotional appeals** are messages designed to persuade an audience by creating strong feelings. Emotional appeals also include vivid imagery and **loaded words**—words packed with emotion—to create:

- **fear**, which taps into worries about losing one’s comfort and security
- **pity**, which draws on a sympathy and compassion for others
- **guilt**, which relies on one’s sense of morality or ethics

For example, in the first part of Edwards’s speech, he compares God’s anger to the crushing of a worm. As you read, you will be prompted to notice other emotional appeals.

## Vocabulary in Context

Note: Words are listed in the order in which they appear in the text.

**whet** (hwět) *adj.* sharpened

*A **whet** knife is better for cutting than a dull one.*

**discern** (dĭ-sûrn') *v.* to perceive or recognize something

*Sara could not **discern** her friends' faces in the crowd.*

**appease** (ə-pēz') *v.* to bring peace, quiet, or calm to; to soothe

*I tried to **appease** my little sister, but she kept crying.*

**abhor** (ăb-hôr') *v.* to regard with disgust

*Some people **abhor** spiders, but others find them fascinating.*

**abominable** (ə-bŏm'ə-nə-bəl) *adj.* thoroughly detestable

*Many **abominable** acts are committed during wartime.*

**ascribe** (ə-skrīb') *v.* to attribute to a specified cause or source

*The doctor **ascribed** my rash to hiking through poison oak.*

**incense** (ĭn-sĕns') *v.* to cause to be extremely angry

*I am **incensed** by companies that dump waste into our rivers.*

**induce** (ĭn-dŏs') *v.* to succeed in persuading someone to do something

*Nothing could **induce** my cat to willingly take a bath.*

**deliverance** (dĭ-lĭv'ər-əns) *n.* rescue from danger

*The trapped miners hoped for **deliverance**.*

**mitigation** (mĭt-ĭ-gā'shən) *n.* lessening of something that causes suffering

*Lotion can provide **mitigation** of the discomfort of sunburn.*

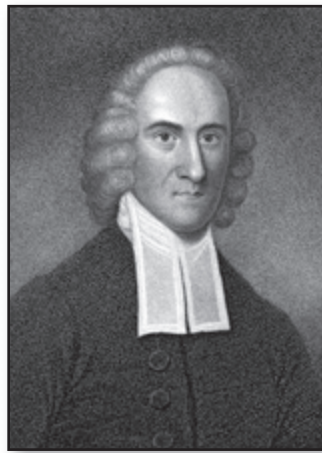
**SET A PURPOSE FOR READING**

Read this excerpt from “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” to learn how Jonathan Edwards tried to keep his congregation in line.

# Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

Sermon by

**JONATHAN EDWARDS**



**BACKGROUND** When Jonathan Edwards delivered a sermon, with its fiery descriptions of hell and eternal damnation, people listened. Edwards believed that religion should be rooted not only in reason but also in emotion. When Edwards delivered this sermon in 1741 to a congregation in Enfield, Connecticut, he read as he always did, in a composed style, with few gestures or movements. However, the sermon had a dramatic effect on his listeners, many of whom wept and moaned.

**PAUSE & REFLECT**

In the first four lines, Edwards claims that God throwing his enemies to hell is as easy as crushing a worm crawling on the ground. How does this description characterize God?

*This description portrays God as*

*powerful and ruthless.*

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We find it easy to tread on and crush a worm that we see crawling on the earth; so it is easy for us to cut or singe a slender thread that any thing hangs by; thus easy is it for God when he pleases to cast his enemies down to hell. . . . **PAUSE & REFLECT**

They<sup>1</sup> 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 angry as he is with many miserable creatures now tormented  
10 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

1. **they:** Earlier in the sermon, Edwards refers to all “unconverted men,” whom he considers God’s enemies. Unconverted men are people who have not been “born again,” meaning that they have not accepted Jesus Christ.



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. **A**

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. . . . **B**

Unconverted men walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering, and there are innumerable places in this covering so weak that they will not bear their weight, and these places are not seen. The arrows of death fly unseen at noonday; the sharpest sight cannot **discern** them. God has so many different unsearchable ways of taking wicked men out of the world and sending them to hell, that there is nothing to make it appear, that God had need to be at the expense of a miracle, or go out of the ordinary course of his providence, to destroy any wicked man, at any moment. . . .

So that, thus it is that natural men<sup>2</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 towards 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 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> 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

**A PERSUASION**

Circle and read footnote 1. Which members of the congregation is Edwards especially trying to reach through his sermon?

He is targeting his speech to  
members of the congregation  
who have not been "born again."

**whet** (hwĕt) *adj.* sharpened

**B EMOTIONAL APPEALS**

Reread lines 18–23. Circle details that create **imagery** of a fire. What type of **emotional appeal** is Edwards using?

Edwards is making an appeal  
to fear.

**discern** (dĭ-sŭrn') *v.* to perceive or recognize something

**appease** (ə-pĕz') *v.* to bring peace, quiet, or calm to; to soothe

2. **natural men:** people who have not been born again.  
3. **would fain:** would rather.  
4. **Mediator:** Jesus Christ, who mediates, or is the means of bringing about, salvation.

**C EMOTIONAL APPEALS**

**Loaded language**, or words with strong emotional associations, can be used to influence an audience's attitude. Underline examples of loaded language you find in lines 33–37.

**D PERSUASION**

Reread lines 57–61. Underline the things that some members of the congregation do to appear religious. Which members of the congregation is Edwards singling out here?

Edwards singles out unconverted

people who act religious to keep

up appearances.

**abhor** (ăb-hôr') v. to regard with disgust

**abominable** (ə-bŏm'ə-nə-bəl) adj. thoroughly detestable

**ascribe** (ə-skrīb') v. to attribute to a specified cause or source

security to them. In short, they have no refuge, nothing to take hold of. . . . **C**

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, 50 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, and may keep up a form of religion in your families and closets,<sup>5</sup> and in the house of 60 God, it is nothing but his mere pleasure that keeps you from being this moment swallowed up in everlasting destruction. . . . **D**

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, **abhors** you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more **abominable** in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet 70 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<sup>6</sup> 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

5. **closets**: private rooms for meditation.

6. **you was suffered**: you were permitted.





worship. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason  
80 why you do not this very moment drop down into hell. **E**

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>7</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,  
90 nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to  
**induce** God to spare you one moment. . . .

It is *everlasting* wrath. It would be dreadful to suffer this  
fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you  
must suffer it to all eternity. There will be no end to this  
exquisite<sup>8</sup> horrible misery. When you look forward, you shall  
see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will  
swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will  
absolutely despair of ever having any **deliverance**, any end, any  
**mitigation**, any rest at all. You will know certainly that you  
100 must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling  
and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance; and  
then when you have so done, when so many ages have actually  
been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but  
a point to what remains. So that your punishment will indeed  
be infinite. Oh, who can express what the state of a soul in such  
circumstances is! All that we can possibly say about it, gives but  
a very feeble, faint representation of it; it is inexpressible and  
inconceivable: For “who knows the power of God’s anger?”<sup>9</sup>

How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in  
110 the danger of this great wrath and infinite misery! But this is the  
dismal case of every soul in this congregation that has not been

**E EMOTIONAL APPEALS**

Circle the **simile**, or comparison, in lines 62–63. What does Edwards compare the congregation to?

He compares the congregation to  
a spider or insect dangling over  
a fire.

**incense** (ɪn-səns') v. to cause to be extremely angry

**induce** (ɪn-doo's') v. to succeed in persuading someone to do something

What word might you use in place of the word **induce**?

Possible answer: persuade, make

**deliverance** (dɪ-lɪv'ər-əns) n. rescue from danger

**mitigation** (mɪt-ɪ-gā'shən) n. lessening of something that causes suffering

7. **burn it asunder** (ə-sʊn'dər): burn it into separate parts or pieces.

8. **exquisite** (ɛk'skwɪ-zɪt): intensely felt.

9. **“who knows . . . anger?”**: an allusion to Psalm 90:11 in the Bible—“Who knoweth the power of thine anger?”



**Monitor Your Comprehension**

**F PERSUASION**

Reread lines 114–128. Underline details that describe the sinners who have accepted God. Underline the details that describe the unrepentant sinners. What makes this contrast so persuasive?

It's persuasive because it appeals

to opposite sensations and

experiences: feasting, singing,

and rejoicing versus suffering,

mourning, and howling.

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born again, however moral and strict, sober and religious, they may otherwise be. . . .

And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open, and stands in the door calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners; a day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God. Many are daily coming<sup>10</sup> from the east, west, north, and south; many that were very lately in the same  
120 miserable condition that you are in, are now in a happy state, with their hearts filled with love to him who has loved them, and washed them from their sins in his own blood, and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God. How awful is it to be left behind at such a day! To see so many others feasting, while you are pining and perishing! To see so many rejoicing and singing for joy of heart, while you have cause to mourn for sorrow of heart, and howl for vexation of spirit! How can you rest one moment in such a condition? . . . **F**

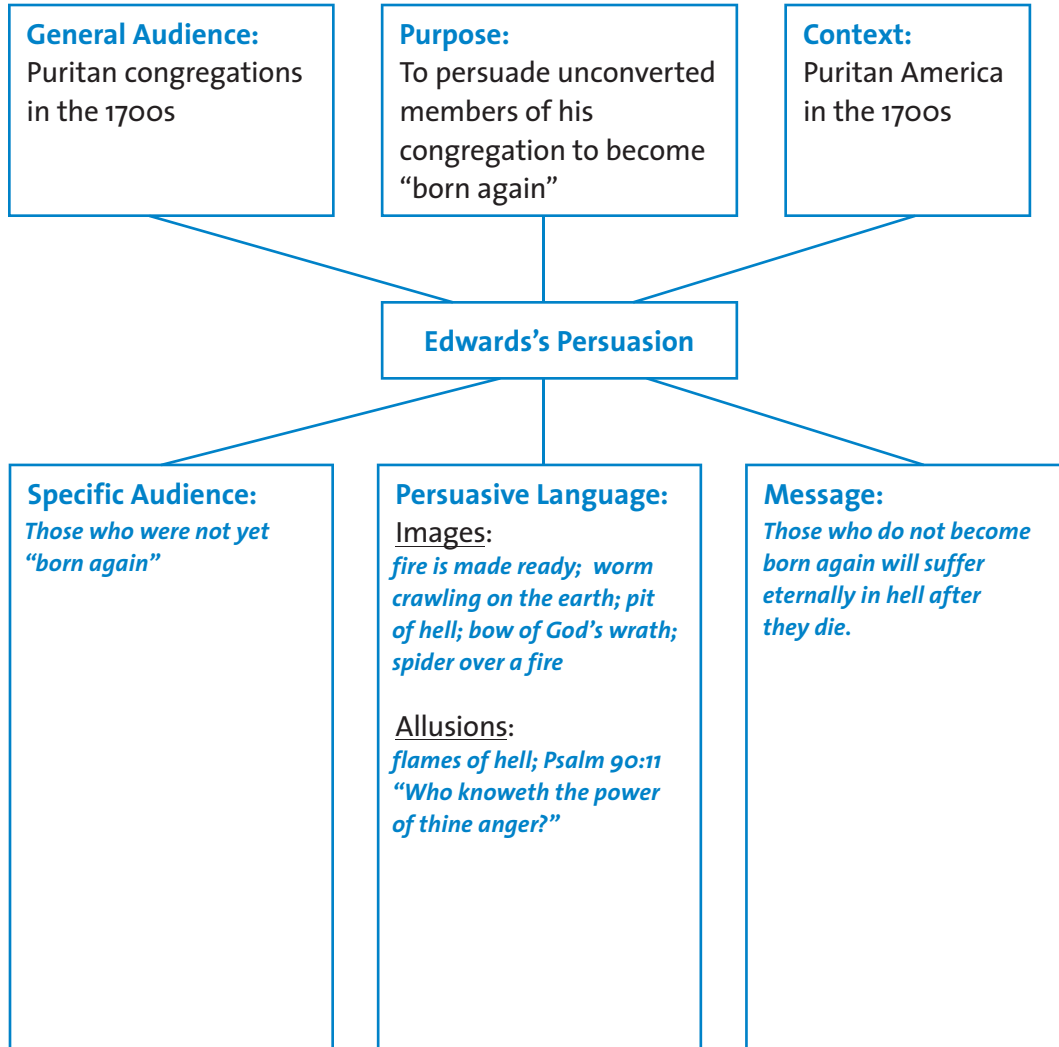
Therefore, let every one that is out of Christ, now awake and  
130 fly from the wrath to come. . . .

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10. **Many . . . coming:** a reference to the hundreds of people who were being converted during the Great Awakening.

### Text Analysis: Persuasion

Analyze the persuasive techniques Edwards used in his sermon by completing the chart below.



What role does the appeal to fear or terror play in Edwards's sermon? Cite evidence to support your response.

*Possible answer: Edwards wanted members of his congregation to become born again.*

*Because Puritans were a God-fearing people, he used a serious, powerful tone to address them. He probably succeeded in persuading many of those people with his fiery language and frightening images.*



### Reading Strategy: Analyze Emotional Appeals

Review the examples of words, phrases, and images you recorded as you read. In the chart below, record examples of the images Edwards created to produce each type of emotional appeal listed.

Emotional Appeal	Imagery
Fear	<i>God can cast enemies into hell as easily as we would crush a worm; God holds you over the pit as one holds a spider over the fire</i>
Guilt	<i>You are a venomous serpent, a stubborn rebel</i>
Hope	<i>thrown the door of mercy wide open; many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God</i>

### What keeps you IN LINE?

In his sermon, Edwards acknowledges that his listeners may already be moral and religious. If he isn't trying to scare listeners into moral behavior, what is his true purpose?

*Possible answer: He might be trying to encourage his listeners to accept God so they can enjoy and experience his mercy.*

### Vocabulary Practice

Read each statement. Write *T* for true or *F* for false.

1. If a movie is said to be **abominable**, you should expect to hate it.   *T*
2. A good way to **appease** a friend is to criticize her.   *F*
3. The **mitigation** of suffering is a noble goal.   *T*
4. If you **discern** something, you notice it.   *T*
5. A person who **abhors** you is probably a close friend.   *F*
6. If you **ascribe** a motive to a crime, you tell why someone did it.   *T*
7. One way to **incense** someone is to compliment that person.   *F*
8. To cut a steak more easily, you might **whet** your knife.   *T*
9. Passengers would seek **deliverance** if their ship sank.   *T*
10. If I **induce** you to do a hard job, I persuade you to do it.   *T*

## Academic Vocabulary in Writing

document    illustrate    interpret    promote    reveal

What does Edwards’s sermon **reveal** about Puritan thought on the human condition? Do you think the Puritans believed that they had full control over their own lives? Explain how Puritans saw themselves in relation to God. Use at least two of the Academic Vocabulary words in your explanation. Definitions for these terms are listed on page 1.

*Answers will vary but should include two Academic Vocabulary words and discuss how*

*Puritans viewed themselves in relation to God: They are sinners deserving of punishment;*

*God is righteous; people have only two choices—accept God’s laws or suffer for eternity.*

### Assessment Practice

**DIRECTIONS** Use *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* to answer questions 1–6.

- The purpose of Jonathan Edwards’s sermon is to persuade —
  - more people to attend church
  - the unconverted to be born again
  - Catholics to convert to Puritanism
  - sinners to leave the church
- Which congregation members does Edwards most want to persuade?
  - those who do not fear God’s wrath
  - those who have been “born again”
  - those who fear God’s anger
  - those who have never sinned
- Which quote is an example of loaded language that appeals to emotion?
  - natural men are held in the hand of God*
  - they have done nothing in the least*
  - you may have reformed your life*
  - swallowed up in everlasting destruction*
- In the phrase *washed them from their sins in his own blood*, the pronoun *his* refers to —
  - an unconverted man
  - a spider
  - Jesus Christ
  - Jonathan Edwards
- The words *rejoicing*, *feasting*, and *singing* in lines 122–125 appeal to —
  - revenge
  - hunger
  - pride
  - joy
- The last sentence on page 44 is an example of which persuasive technique?
  - an appeal to pity
  - an appeal to fear
  - an appeal to reason
  - loaded language