

Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is a sermon written by Jonathan Edwards, an American theologian, while preaching in a congregation in Enfield and Northampton. Like other works by the author, the sermon combines intense imagery of Hades with observations of the “contemporary” world and constant citation of the Bible. As the most famous of the scholar’s work, the sermon fits Edward’s style of preaching. It has been subject of study among history and theology scholars through providing insights to the period from 1730 to 1755 of the Great Awakening. This paper highlights the Puritan quotes and discusses similar ideologies in the sermon.

The purpose of the sermon was because of the Great Awakening. During this period, the church in Connecticut had less influence of the Great Awakening. He spoke upon the invitation by the church’s pastor to preach to the congregation. He aimed to teach the congregation about the horrible situation in hell, the dangers of sinful behavior, and the risk of being lost in the world to come. He described the risky position of the people who fail to honor Christ’s call for repentance. In the final section of the sermon, Edwards indicates his religious argument throughout the bible and history of the scriptures. He does this by invoking examples and stories across all books of the Bible.

While different from other early renowned Puritans, Edwards utilizes the “fire and brimstone” approach while preaching to his congregation about what he believes to be God’s anger. The sermon was designed to make the congregation aware that their conduct and actions on earth were more important than any other thing. It also seeks to add that particular punishments awaited the sinners in hell because they fail to adhere to proper religious virtues as provided by the Holy Scriptures. While Edward wished to influence the colonists’ actions, he considered it appropriate to discuss God’s anger with the high possibility of sinning and overindulgence instead of continuing with the usual warnings about sinning. To achieve this objective of ensuring that his congregants were aware of their hazardous position in the world, he ensured that they knew that God had the ability to wipe them away.

In his view, in spite of the fact that they could be saved through Christianity and were not created for neither hell nor heaven, humans are wretched creatures, always surviving on God’s mercy. He reduces the association between God and men by reminding the congregants how it should be, “easy to tread on and crush a worm that was once crawling on the earth” (499). This is also how God views people on earth. By likening humans to worms in this sermon, Edwards stresses the level of God’s mercy and at the same time inspiring his listeners to struggle for some “status” and acquire legitimacy in God’s eyes. Generally, though the sermon’s objective was changing the sinful behaviors of the congregation by reminding them that they were only surviving on God’s mercy, he attempts to create better people from the congregation. Although the sermon is frightening, it appears that Edwards wished it so to ensure that the people were scared and inspired simultaneously.

Edwards believed that humans had the ability to save their souls and that this idea of election was invalid. Although he provides that all humans are born with intrinsic degeneracy, by living a holy life, this natural sinfulness can be overcome. There is a deficiency of the typology available in much other Puritan literature and instead of incorporating this characteristic, Edwards instead emphasizes on the present behavior of the people, rather than the lives of the spiritual individuals or their prophesies. One of the most significant themes in the sermon is God’s irresistible grace. This ideology is founded upon the belief that it is always God’s decision to condemn or save a soul and that at any time, a person can be sent to hell, as provided by, “There is no want of power in God to cast wicked men into hell at any moment” (499).

According to the Puritan beliefs of Edwards and while observing the tenets of irresistible grace, sinners are only allowed to stay on the world because God is not yet ready to wipe them off of the face of the earth. At one point in the sermon, he expresses this by saying that, “The only reason why sinners are not in hell already, and do not fall now, is only that God’s appointed time has not yet come. For when time comes, . . . then they shall be left to fall, as they are inclined by their own weight” (499). The said weight in this quote is not just for the presently committed sins, but the weight of the intrinsic dissoluteness, which all human beings are carrying. After stating this, Edwards poses a great palpably by directing it to the people when he says, “God is a great deal angry with great numbers that are now on earth, yea, doubtless, with many that are now in this congregation” (500).

Although contemporary readers might be tempted to regard this one as an outright threat tactic method of ensuring repentance and inspiration to the congregation and change their behaviors and actions, this sermon is however a striking movement from the other Puritan literature and must have come as a radicalizing sermon in the 18th century. He finishes the sermon by one last plea, “Therefore let every soul that is in Christ, now awake, and fly from the wrath to come” (500). He indirectly gives hope to those sinners by saying when they return to Christ, they will escape the wrath of God as he outlines in the sermon.

In conclusion, the quotes highlighted in this paper from Edwards’ “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” show the Puritan beliefs and ideologies in the sermon. The quotes identified in the sermon show Edwards’ belief in the Puritan beliefs of becoming pure through Christian doctrine and worship. According to the sermon, Edwards was advocating for obeying religious rules, which he said was to ensure that the people avoided hell. Quoting and giving other examples from the Bible, Edwards shows Puritan belief, which teaches the people to live according to the expectations of the Bible in all ways. The identified quotes show how morality – of even the smallest forms – is important in avoiding hell, where God is able to send sinners at any time. Preaching is one important component of the Puritans as was indicated by this intense preaching. Edwards’s sermon about God’s anger is bent on convincing people to embrace purity and avoid the wrath of God.

Work Cited

Kimnach, Wilson; Maskell, Caleb; Minkema, Kenneth, Jonathan Edwards's Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010