

GLORIOUS DAMNATION: HELL AS AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN THE THEOLOGY OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

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I. INTRODUCTION

Great changes have transpired in the last half-century in the reputation of Jonathan Edwards. Among scholars in a variety of fields of study, his reputation has been substantially rehabilitated. Perhaps his reputation had hit its nadir in the late nineteenth century among literati such as Mark Twain and Oliver Wendell Holmes, who dismissed him as a demented hell-fire preacher and an eccentric theologian. The best that could be said of him was that he was an intellectual tragedy, a great mind wasted on theology and revivalism. He could have been so much more: a real philosopher or a scientist, for example, as we can glimpse from some of his writings. Of course, this view assumes a very low estimation of the value of theology, an assumption to which some of us would object.

Now the pendulum has swung very far in the other direction. There is an obvious tendency among scholars to downplay or ignore the theme of hell in Edwards's writings. Even among scholars sympathetic to his Calvinistic views, one finds this outlook. Hell is often treated as a dispensable aspect of Edwards's theology. However, this paper will hopefully establish its indispensability. Without hell, God's glory would not be adequately manifested in all its dimensions. Just as the majesty of a huge waterfall appears in the thunderous destructive impact of its force on the rocks below, the grandeur of God appears as his wrath lands on his enemies in eternity. In this paper, I intend to argue that for Edwards the doctrine of hell is a very significant aspect of his thought, a key to help unlock other areas of his theology. Many have remarked on Edwards's theocentric focus. It is in his view of hell that Edwards is most typically theocentric. He accords little place to human sentiment about it. He sees divine glory as everything and the vindication of divine concerns as overwhelmingly paramount. Expressing the views of many, Gura wrote that “[t]he essential Edwards . . . will not be found in “*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.*”¹ Here I intend to demonstrate the opposite.

It is a striking feature of Edwards that he totally lacks any inhibition in discoursing about hell. He exulted in many of the very things that modern

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¹ Philip F. Gura, “Edwards and American Literature,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (ed. Stephen J. Stein; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 277.

church people are loath to mention. Far from being embarrassed about the doctrine of hell, he believed it redounded to the glory of God, and he brought it up seemingly at every opportunity. Besides using it as a motivator in his awakening sermons, Edwards developed the doctrine of hell in at least two contexts: (1) as an instrument of theophany, a mirror for manifesting the greatness of the divine Being; and (2) as the final arena for exposing human wickedness and God's triumph over it in redemptive history. In a previous paper, I have already explored Edwards's apology for hell, so I will not deal much with that aspect here.² After surveying scholarly treatments of Edwards's thinking on hell, I will briefly consider the great volume of material about hell in Edwards's work. Next, I will look into how he develops the theme of divine transcendence in his exposition of hell. Then, I will examine the ways in which his treatment of hell highlights the ugliness of human evil. Finally, I will draw out some implications of all this for Edwards scholarship and theological reflection in general.

II. HELL IN THE HANDS OF EDWARDS SCHOLARS

In his overview of Edwards's theology, Nichols shows how Edwards scholarship has often been distorted by the biases and ideological commitments of the scholars themselves.³ Brand makes the same point.⁴ Bias has been evident most of all in regard to his theology of hell, which seems to be generally repugnant even to Edwards scholars. It is an astonishing fact that there seem to be few Edwards scholars who can deal with his view of hell without any sign of censure, embarrassment, or apology. To be sure, there have been some positive treatments of Edwards's writings on hell, especially in its literary aspects, such as Cady's excellent discourse on the literary qualities of "Sinners."⁵ However, it is fair to say that these are the exceptions rather than the rule, even among Edwards's most ardent admirers in the scholarly community. In dealing with this topic, most Edwards scholars behave like family members dealing with an embarrassing eccentricity of one of their members.

Typical of the hell-denigrators is Crocco. He quotes approvingly George Gordon's 1901 essay: "Nothing could be sublimer [sic] than his conception of God at his best; nothing could be more incredible than the treatment to which

² Bruce W. Davidson, "Reasonable Damnation: How Jonathan Edwards Argued for the Rationality of Hell," *JETS* 38 (1995) 47–56.

³ Stephen J. Nichols, *An Absolute Sort of Certainty: The Holy Spirit and the Apologetics of Jonathan Edwards* (Philipsburg: P & R, 2003) 5–17.

⁴ David C. Brand, *Profile of the Last Puritan: Jonathan Edwards, Self-Love, and the Dawn of the Beatific* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991) x.

⁵ Edwin H. Cady, "The Artistry of Jonathan Edwards," in *Critical Essays on Jonathan Edwards* (ed. William Scheick; Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980) 257–64. See also R. L. Stuart, "Jonathan Edwards at Enfield: 'And Oh the Cheerfulness and Pleasantness . . .,'" *American Literature* 68 (1976) 46–59. Chris Morgan's excellent book-length study of Edwards's views of hell in relation to the current annihilationism controversy is also exceptional (*Jonathan Edwards and Hell*; Mentor: Glasgow, 2004). He demonstrates that hell is connected to the rest of Edwards's theology. See also William J. Wainwright, "Jonathan Edwards and the Doctrine of Hell," in *Jonathan Edwards: Philosophical Theologian* (ed. Paul Helm and Oliver Crisp; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) 13–26.

he subjects the race under God.”⁶ This quotation dichotomizes two things that are really closely bound up together: Edwards’s high view of God’s glory led him to separate it from human well-being. God is in no sense dependent on human welfare for happiness or greatness; in fact, he is all the more glorified in the punishment of the wicked. However, this quotation neatly captures the conventional view of many Edwards scholars. “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” epitomizes the type of thing that offends them. Kreider sums up the state of things well: “Even those who are sympathetic toward Edwards and his theology seem embarrassed by this sermon. Some Edwards supporters rationalize that this message is not typical of his sermons, that although he did preach on hell and judgment, this was not a major theme of his preaching, and the language of most of his sermons was less graphic and harsh.”⁷ Among more traditional, conservative scholars, Gerstner is at pains to assure us that Edwards preached more about heaven.⁸ Yet Gerstner himself did a count of sermons about Matthew 13 and found more about hell than about heaven.⁹ Similarly, Nichols contends that Edwards wrote much more on heaven than on hell but offers no proof for this claim.¹⁰

Antipathy to hell slants some scholarly treatments even more. Among those attacking Edwards’s ideas about hell, Pinnock presents perhaps the most offensive caricature of Edwards, likening his description of saints contemplating the torments of the damned to “people watching a cat trapped in a microwave squirm in agony, while taking delight in it.”¹¹ In a similar vein, after doing a commendable job of analyzing some of Edwards’s arguments for hell, Colwell remarks that “the most painful aspect” of Edwards’s view is that hell will be the subject of praise by the saints in eternity. He calls this an “obscene prospect” and repeats the mantra that “his [God’s] mercy overwhelms his justice” six times, speaking as if these two attributes were in an unequal wrestling match. He ends by insisting that “speaking of hell as unending punishment is offensive, obscene, and blasphemous.”¹² However, even after condemning the traditional doctrine in such terms, he wants to leave open the possibility that it may be true after all!¹³ Following Colwell, Holmes takes a more fair-minded but still critical approach to hell in Edwards’s written work. He devotes a whole chapter to the subject but concentrates on only five hell-sermons. Later in the chapter he presents his own alternative revision of

⁶ Stephen Crocco, “Edwards’s Intellectual Legacy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (ed. Stephen J. Stein; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 305.

⁷ Glenn R. Kreider, “Sinners in the Hands of a Gracious God,” *BSac* 163/651 (2006) 260.

⁸ John H. Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 9. Nevertheless, Gerstner deserves great credit for his forthright and insightful handling of the theme of hell in Edwards’s work.

⁹ *Ibid.* 52.

¹⁰ Stephen J. Nichols, *Heaven on Earth: Capturing Jonathan Edwards’s Vision of Living In Between* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006) 20–21.

¹¹ Clark H. Pinnock, “The Conditional View,” in *Four Views on Hell* (ed. William Crockett; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 140.

¹² John E. Colwell, “The Glory of God’s Justice and the Glory of God’s Grace: Contemporary Reflections on the Doctrine of Hell in the Teaching of Jonathan Edwards,” *EvQ* 67/4 (1995) 303–8.

¹³ *Ibid.* 308.

Edwards's view, finding Christ's atoning death sufficient to enable Christian theology to dispense with the horrors of hell.¹⁴ Allen wonders if Holmes's view about the Son of God suffering hell is really less offensive than Edwards's.¹⁵ Certainly, the concept of God himself suffering punishment in hell would be hard to reconcile with Edwards's theocentric worldview or with traditional Christian respect for God. Holmes also expresses a misconception common among Edwards scholars: that there is not much about hell in Edwards's major theological works.¹⁶ Furthermore, Holmes asserts that the doctrine of hell creates a kind of bifurcation in Edwards's thought, producing "two different Gods" in his theology.¹⁷ However, as we will see, Edwards's treatment of hell actually coheres well with his radical theocentrism and his unbending indictment of human depravity.

A number of prominent Edwards scholars basically ignore his writings on hell. For instance, in his celebrated book on beauty as a key element in Edwards's thought, Delattre makes no reference to hell at all, even though Edwards saw a kind of beauty in it.¹⁸ Danaher acknowledges this while at the same time disapproving of Edwards's admiration for hell.¹⁹ McClymond's book on Edwards deals very briefly with the theme of hell in Edwards's work. He also mistakenly maintains that the *End of Creation* has an "eerie silence" about hell.²⁰ Similarly, Cherry has only two pages on hell, where he downplays the eternity of punishment and instead focuses on the existential threat of "disintegration," as if hell in Edwards's writings were about annihilation of consciousness instead of eternal, conscious misery.²¹ Edwards himself certainly knew the difference and argued against an annihilationist interpretation of hell.²²

Of course, there are also some scholars who go against the grain. Fiering clearly grasps the importance of hell in Edwards's thought. In one chapter of his book on Edwards, titled "Hell and the Humanitarians," he maintains that the issue of hell is one key to Edwards's philosophical and ethical views in

¹⁴ Stephen R. Holmes, *God of Grace and God of Glory: An Account of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 234.

¹⁵ Michael Allen, "Jonathan Edwards and the Lapsarian Debate," *SJT* 62 (2009) 312.

¹⁶ Holmes, *God of Grace* 216. Holmes typifies many modern people in that he seems more scandalized by the thought of humans suffering endless divine wrath than by the blasphemy involved in an infinite divine being suffering insult.

¹⁷ Ibid. 218, 233–40. On the matter of this alleged inconsistency, it is worth noting that if Edwards admitted universal salvation, then he would become inconsistent with his own view that faith and repentance are necessary for justification and salvation. In any case, Edwards shows that there is no inherent contradiction between mercy and justice in respect to hell (Davidson, "Reasonable Damnation" 49–51). Like Colwell's, Holmes's objections seem more emotional than theological.

¹⁸ Roland A. Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

¹⁹ William J. Danaher Jr., *The Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 254.

²⁰ Michael J. McClymond, *Encounters With God: An Approach to the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 63.

²¹ Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 68–69.

²² Morgan, *Jonathan Edwards* 113–27; Davidson, "Reasonable Damnation" 53–55.

works such as *The Nature of True Virtue*. In that book, Edwards was responding to contemporary ethical thinkers like Francis Hutcheson, who were creating man-centered ethical systems along with de-emphasizing sinfulness and liability to divine judgment.²³ Furthermore, Fiering points out that Edwards's treatise on free will was basically an apology for God's justice in condemning sinners to hell: "Can God be morally justified in the condemnation of sinners that He has made? . . . The whole purpose of Edwards's treatise on the will could be reduced to the one task of solving the paradox of man's being responsible for his own condemnation despite his subjection to God's decrees."²⁴ Similarly, original sin became an important issue in light of the fact that it was the basis for eternal condemnation.²⁵ Fiering acknowledges that a number of theological issues lose their force when hell is taken out of the picture. Why worry about them in a universalist or an annihilationist scheme? Both free will and original sin become problematic only on the assumption that hell is the destination for the unsaved.

III. THE SHEER MASS OF MATERIAL ON HELL IN EDWARDS'S WORK

In regard to those scholars who downplay hell in Edwards's thought, there is one great obstacle to their view: discoursing on hell accounts for a great quantity of Edwards's writing. This has been ably demonstrated by those scholars who paid some attention to it. Anyone who doubts it can do a quick online search at the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale, finding thousands of occurrences of the word "hell" in his major works, sermons, miscellanies, and elsewhere. Of course, the most obvious examples are his well-known awakening sermons with the aim of shocking the complacently unrepentant. Gerstner's comparison of sermons about heaven and hell in regard to one passage has already been mentioned. However, references to hell are abundant in many other sermons too, especially in the application sections. For example, in one sermon concerning the sanctification of believers in respect to their physical bodies, he launches into a warning about what will happen to an unsanctified body in hell. Evidently he saw hell not only as an awakening doctrine but also as a sanctifying doctrine.²⁶ Even in a sermon about the inner peace of the believer, there is a warning about hell to the unrepentant, who have no rational basis for peace of mind.²⁷ Sermons about sin, divine justice, and the nature of conversion frequently make mention of hell. Even in his justly famous and beautiful sermon on heaven—"Heaven Is a World of

²³ Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981) 200–260.

²⁴ Ibid. 292.

²⁵ Ibid. 52–59.

²⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *The Blessing of God: Previously Unpublished Sermons of Jonathan Edwards* (ed. Michael McMullen; Nashville: B & H, 2003) 309.

²⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 25: *Sermons and Discourses 1743–1758* (ed. Wilson H. Kimnach; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 550.

Love"—there is a substantial subsection on hell.²⁸ If one broadens the definition of a hell-sermon to include those that contain some kind of reference to hell, then the number becomes very large indeed.

To that we can add a number references to hell in his major theological works and other lesser-known works. Some of his major works—*Original Sin* and the two treatises *True Virtue* and *End of Creation*—were written at the same time as essays about hell. Fiering considers this to be strong evidence that all of these themes were connected in his thought.²⁹ Moreover, these works themselves furnish explicit confirmation of the connection, as we will see. Edwards's doctrine of hell is intertwined with his thinking about both divine glory and human wickedness, which are prominent themes in all these works.³⁰

IV: HELL AS A MIRROR OF DIVINE GREATNESS

One problem with treating Edwards's so-called “awakening sermons” as a separate, special category is that they are at the same time theodicy sermons. Along with indicting the sin of humanity evangelistically, they set forth the unimpeachable justice of God. In his evangelistic sermons, Edwards wants to vindicate God at least as much as he wants to convict sinners. This concern is even more obvious in his many of his theological treatises. Not stopping at simply answering common objections and making a logical case for the reality of hell, Edwards aggressively commends hell as an essential manifestation of the glory of the divine being. And in Edwards's thought, the manifestation of the glory of the divine being is the “chief end” of everything God does. Without hell, Edwards asserts, this program would fall short of a full glorification of God. Thanks to hell, God is glorified much more profoundly and comprehensively than he would be otherwise. One sermon on hell titled “Wicked Men Answer the End of their Beings in No Other Way But in Their Suffering” comes from Prov 16:4 (“The Lord hath made all things for himself, yea, even the wicked for the day of evil”). As the title suggests, Edwards argues that the glory of God is the main object of the existence and punishment of the wicked.³¹ This shows us that God's creation of hell is a special case of self-directed activity.

The unstated assumption behind a lot of criticism of Edwards's view of hell is the belief that human well-being should weigh more heavily with God. However, Edwards and traditional Calvinist thought do not share this assumption. In hell, unhappy men will glorify God. In Edwards's view, far from being a revelation of “another God,” hell will amplify and enlarge the revelation of the one God. In his sermon “The Eternity of Hell Torments,” Edwards expresses

²⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8: *Ethical Writings* (ed. Paul Ramsey; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 390–92.

²⁹ Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought* 238–39, n. 107.

³⁰ John J. Bombaro, “Beautiful Beings: The Function of the Reprobate in the Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards” (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 2002) 159.

³¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Unless You Repent: Fifteen Previously Unpublished Sermons on the Fate Awaiting the Impenitent* (ed. Don Kistler; Orlando, FL: Soli Deo Gloria, 2005) 53–62.

his concern that certain diminished views of hell actually constitute a kind of blasphemy. For example, rejecting hell's existence amounts to accusing God of lying so as "to make a devil of Him."³² This blasphemy is most obvious in the suggestion that God is only dissembling in his threats of hell.³³ Blasphemy is a sin concerning the honor of God and thus was a very significant matter to Edwards. However, he goes even further in another sermon, arguing that "without a sense of both [wrath and love], the idea of God would be maimed and imperfect, and would be unanswerable to His nature and true glory."³⁴ Thus hell becomes a necessity for divine self-glorification. Furthermore, as Bombaro explains, the suffering of Christ cannot satisfy this need, since Christ was not truly the object of God the Father's wrath. For Edwards, universal salvation would be dishonoring to God: "How unsuitable would it be and disagreeable for God to save and carry men into heaven, while they are all the while opposing and resisting and struggling to go to hell? This would be to 'cast pearls before swine' . . ."³⁵

Essentially, Edwards views hell as a way in which God enhances the revelation of his transcendence. Many modern Edwards interpreters have tended to focus on his treatment of God's immanence—as the source of all being, an idea that appears with special prominence in his treatise on virtue. This has caused them to downplay his equal concern for maintaining God's transcendence above the human world. Holifield remarks that God's separateness from his creation can be seen especially in Edwards's teaching about hell, which helped to save Edwards's views from pantheism or panentheism.³⁶ The divine transcendence revealed in hell encompasses God's power, fearfulness, absolute sovereignty, infinity, eternity, and holiness. Edwards dwells on all these attributes of the divine nature in his meditations on hell. A search of the words "transcendent" and "transcendence" in the online works of Edwards at the Yale Edwards Center reveals that he often employs the terms in his major works such as *Religious Affections* and in his sermons, always in reference to deity. The word "ineffable" appears in some of Edwards's descriptions of the extreme, awe-inspiring torments of hell. It appears also in contexts such as this from *Religious Affections*: "The things that appertain to the Supreme Being, are vastly different from things that are humane; that there is a godlike, high, and glorious excellency in them, that does so distinguish them from the things which are of men, that the difference is *ineffable*. . . ."³⁷

It is clear that this word is associated in his thought with God's transcendence. Consider another passage making use of the word "ineffable," taken from the sermon "The Future Punishment of the Wicked Unavoidable and

³² Edwards, *Unless You Repent* 49.

³³ Jonathan Edwards, *The Torments of Hell: Jonathan Edwards on Eternal Damnation* (ed. William C. Nichols; Ames, IA: International Outreach, 2006) 123.

³⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Unless You Repent* 37.

³⁵ Edwards, *Blessing of God* 375.

³⁶ E. Brooks Holifield, "Edwards as a Theologian," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (ed. Stephen J. Stein; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 148.

³⁷ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2: *Religious Affections* (ed. John E. Smith; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959) 299 (emphasis added).

Intolerable": "Then all will see that God is a great God indeed; then all will see how dreadful a thing it is to sin against such a God . . . [and see] that mighty power, and that holiness and justice of God, which shall appear in your *ineffable* [my italics] destruction and misery."³⁸ The misery is as sublime as God is sublime. The purpose is to know oneself as a sinner and God as a great Being. There is nothing ineffable about annihilation, certainly, and no revelation of God to the unrepentant either. If one could be conscious in such a state, it would even be a kind of confirmation that one was right not to worry too much about God. As Edwards points out elsewhere, there is no knowing of anything in a state of non-being:

. . . 'tis said in the 90th Psalm, verse 11, "Who knoweth the power of thine anger?" which is as much to say, None can know or conceive till they see or feel [it]. . . The misery of the damned is so awful, and to such an *ineffable* [my italics] extremity, that 'tis a very extraordinary discovery of the greatness of the power of God. This is one end God hath in the damnation of wicked men—to show the greatness of his power, as the Apostle informs us in Romans 9:22.

There is that word "ineffable" again. Neither annihilation nor universal salvation can reveal ineffable divine greatness in this way.

Along with divine ineffability/transcendence, the most prominent characteristic of God manifested in hell is his wrath, which God consciously chooses to make known especially through the instrumentality of hell, as stated in the title of the sermon "It Is One Design That God Has Upon His Heart to Show How Terrible His Wrath Is." The sermon itself proclaims:

As God will have it known how desirable and valuable His favor and love are, so 'tis His will that it should be seen how dreadful His displeasure is. The general reason of the doctrine is this, that it is to the glory of God that the terribleness of His anger should be manifested. . . God is glorious on account of it, and the more anything pertaining to God is known and manifested, the more is God glorified . . . ; it was His end in causing there to be any other beings besides Himself.³⁹

Clearly, the reprobate owe their existence at least in part to God's desire to manifest the greatness of his wrath on sentient objects.

In contrast to Holmes, who maintains over against Edwards that Christ's atoning sacrifice is a sufficient display of divine wrath against sin, Bombaro enlarges on the necessity of hell in manifesting divine wrath in Edwards's thought. Quoting Edwards, he explains:

. . . in Edwards's view, for God's attributes of hatred, righteous indignation, and wrathful power to have perfect exercise, they must be perpetually *perceived and eternal in duration and exercise*. Christ's substitutionary suffering was neither eternal in duration nor representative of God's personal infinite hatred: "God withdrew his comfortable presence from Christ . . . but yet he knew at the same time that God did not hate him, but infinitely loved him. . . Christ's sufferings lasted but a few hours, and there was an eternal end to them. . ." Universalism, therefore, is an impossibility—God must have some intelligent perceiving

³⁸ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* vol. 2 (ed. E. Hickman; Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1834) 82.

³⁹ Edwards, *Unless You Repent* 27–28.

being(s) perpetuate the replication of His hatred, wrath, and retribution . . . to His eternal glory.⁴⁰

So God's program of self-glorification in eternity necessitated the eternal, conscious experience of this wrath on the part of its objects, as well as the observation of the fruits of divine disfavor by the redeemed.⁴¹ Like a perpetual volcanic eruption, this unending display of wrath will call forth the amazement, worship, or terror of the sufferers and redeemed observers.

Following Paul in Rom 9:22, Edwards often contends that divine power is an attribute glorified in hell.⁴² In fact, in Edwards's view, the imposition of hell in eternity follows from a kind of test of strength for God: Will he be able to execute his justice on rebellious sinners or not? Not to punish would be to fail the test and neglect to meet the implied challenge such sinners pose to his wisdom and power. An escape from hell would crown their rebellion with success in the end. He explains this in his sermon "The Future Punishment of the Wicked Unavoidable and Intolerable":

[They] imagine they shall escape the payment of the debt, and design entirely to rob God of his due. . . . If God be wise enough, and strong enough, he will have full satisfaction: he will exact the very uttermost farthing. . . . If the honour of God, upon which sinners trample, finally lie in the dust, it will be because he is not strong enough to vindicate himself.⁴³

Along with power, we see here the concurrent vindication of divine wisdom, honor, and justice.

Even the dimensions of the divine being receive glorification in hell. An eternal punishment will become a fitting revelation of an infinite Being. Edwards was especially interested in the eternity of hell. Eternity was essential to express the full extent of God's wrath against sinners. God's infinite greatness is experienced by the damned directly by means of an eternity of suffering. As one sermon puts it, "in their suffering it shall appear how awful the wrath of an infinite Being is."⁴⁴ In a sense, the infinite God himself is the fires of hell, according to Edwards: "Tis the infinite almighty God himself that shall become the fire [of] the furnace exerting his infinite perfections that way."⁴⁵

Besides being expressive of the infinity of God, hell also represents the incomparable strictness of his justice. In his sermon "God, as the Giver and Judge of the Law, Deals With the Utmost Strictness," he expands on the necessity of God to deal out the mortal, eternal punishment the law promised and prefigured in the sacrificial system to any and all sin, including sins of thought and unbelief. People often seem to think that God ought to deal with sin with something less than "utmost strictness," but Edwards argues that

⁴⁰ Bombaro, "Beautiful Beings" 252.

⁴¹ Ibid. 255.

⁴² Edwards, *Works*, vol. 8: *Ethical Writings* 509.

⁴³ Edwards, *Works*, vol. 2 (*Banner of Truth*) 78.

⁴⁴ Edwards, *Unless You Repent* 59.

⁴⁵ Unpublished sermon on Job 41:9–10, quoted in John H. Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 3 (Powhatan, VA: Berea, 1993) 506.

anything less would be unworthy of him as God, especially since sin is treated without such strictness in this world.⁴⁶ In another sermon, he explains that

God shows the strictness of His justice in the punishment of men in the world to come, because those judgments that God inflicts in this world aren't equal to the desert of sin; but in another world he punishes sin as it deserves, with eternal punishment . . . with an exceedingly great and intolerable misery, as all sin deserves. . . . God's justice in those many things now lies hidden, as it were, but then it will come forth into the light and will be wonderfully discovered.⁴⁷

In terms of justice God's self-revelation remains incomplete as long as sin is finitely, inadequately punished. In the final paragraph of his *End of Creation*, Edwards inserts this comment about God's justice: "God aims at satisfying justice in the eternal damnation of sinners; which will be satisfied by their damnation, considered no otherwise than with regard to its eternal duration."⁴⁸

Finally, one aspect of divine manifestation not often associated with hell is grace. Strangely enough, a sermon such as the famous "Sinners" actually highlights the mercy of God withholding eternal damnation from helpless, guilty sinners, whose existence God continues to support, despite the fact that his wrath already burns toward them with hell-fire, while their own wickedness pulls them down to hell like a great weight.⁴⁹ Furthermore, in Kreider's words, "even more amazing is the fact that He has graciously provided the gift of substitutionary atonement and graciously offers sinners the opportunity to avoid the judgment they deserve."⁵⁰ As they contemplate the full demands of divine justice experienced in hell by the reprobate, the redeemed will have a heightened, transcendent sense of the value of divine grace.⁵¹

V. HELL AS A MIRROR OF HUMAN WICKEDNESS

Like Edwards, Kreider perceptively traces antagonism to hell not only to abhorrence of the prospect of so much suffering but also to antipathy toward the idea of original sin.⁵² Certainly, hell does not affirm human significance in a way that many contemporary people have come to expect. Generally speaking, in modern thinking the status of God has declined, while that of humankind has inflated. For that very reason, Edwards's writings on hell expose the great gulf between the religious thinking of the eighteenth century and that of our own day. This tendency has probably been exacerbated by the influence of popular psychology, which often makes people think of themselves as innocent victims rather than as sinners. Many psychologists themselves have recognized the danger of promoting narcissism and self-justification as a result of psychotherapeutic thinking.⁵³ However, even in the time of Edwards,

⁴⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *A Just and Righteous God: 18 Sermons (13 Previously Unpublished)* (ed. Don Kistler; Orlando, FL: Soli Deo Gloria, 2006) 177–97.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 11–12.

⁴⁸ Edwards, *Works*, vol. 8: *Ethical Writings* 536.

⁴⁹ Kreider, "Sinners" 268–71.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 275.

⁵¹ Davidson, "Reasonable Damnation" 53.

⁵² Kreider, "Sinners" 274.

⁵³ See Tana Dineen, *Manufacturing Victims: What the Psychology Industry is Doing to People* (Montreal: Robert Davies Multimedia, 2001); Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcis-*

there was opposition to the idea of hell. In this regard, Edwards felt that insensitivity to the true nature of human evil was the greatest barrier to people accepting hell.⁵⁴ In his eschatology, this insensibility will not be removed until the eternal state, where the horror of wickedness will be laid bare to all eyes.

Along with being a revelation of God, hell will be a revelation of wicked humanity. Hell will make clear to all observers what the nature of the wicked really is and what evil deserves by its consequences. At the same time, it will bring home to the wicked themselves the true dimensions of their evil and its just deserts, which during life they were obstinate about admitting. Edwards saw this present world as the realm of hypocrisy and dissimulation. Things here are often not what they seem. This is true most of all in respect to religion. Religious piety often springs from self-centered concerns rather than from sincere love for God.⁵⁵ On top of that, a corrupted moral sensibility causes evil to be seen as attractive, while righteousness fails to shine. Heaven and hell will lay bare the true natures of their inhabitants, whether that of saints or reprobates. Hell will dramatically unmask the wicked as repugnant creatures to universal view. In a sense, the wicked already have hell concealed within them: "they have those Hellish principles in them."⁵⁶ This results in a world in constant conflict.⁵⁷ Hell will be a purification and magnification of this wickedness and its attendant ugliness. All will finally see the wicked world for what it is, once God's restraining hand of common grace is removed. Now wickedness is somewhat ameliorated, but in hell all the wicked will openly rage against God, weeping and gnashing their teeth.⁵⁸

Since they have an attraction to sin, the wicked cannot really understand what is so hell-deserving about it (or about themselves) in the way that the godly can. In the last paragraph of his subsection on natural conscience in *True Virtue*, Edwards discusses how the wicked are able to be convinced in heart about the justice of their punishment in hell without at the same time becoming virtuous in disposition. He argues that they can be given a natural understanding of why they deserve hell while still lacking a spiritual sense of the value of divine things.⁵⁹ And by showing them the intensity of God's wrath against sin, hell will convince them of the depth of the evil they love, in a way that nothing else can. As Edwards puts it, "This is the death threatened in the law. This is dying in the highest sense of the word. This is to die sensibly; to die and know it; to be sensible of the gloom of death . . . know, thou stupid, blind hardened wretch, that God doth not see, as thou seest with thy polluted

sism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement (New York: Free Press, 2009); and Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology As Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). Twenge, Campbell, and Vitz maintain that a lot of responsibility can also probably be laid at the door of ministers who have promoted a self-centered, therapeutic message. In various studies, Twenge and Campbell measured a sharp rise in narcissistic attitudes among American young people. They interpret this as stemming from the self-centeredness promoted in popular culture, including the religious world.

⁵⁴ Davidson, "Reasonable Damnation" 50–51.

⁵⁵ Bruce W. Davidson, "The Four Faces of Self-love in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards," *JETS* 51 (2008) 47–56.

⁵⁶ Harry S. Stout, "Edwards as Revivalist" in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (ed. Stephen J. Stein; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 141.

⁵⁷ Edwards, *Blessing of God* 155.

⁵⁸ Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards* 70–72; Edwards, *Works*, vol. 8: *Ethical Writings* 390–91.

⁵⁹ Edwards, *Works*, vol. 8: *Ethical Writings* 598–99.

eyes: thy sins in his sight are infinitely abominable.”⁶⁰ Moreover, while many of those rejecting hell as a human destiny would like to divorce mankind’s fate from Satan’s, Edwards sees an inevitable linkage in their fates, since hell will fully and properly unveil the identity of the whole tribe of evil. In the sermon “Wicked Men Are the Children of the Devil,” Edwards argues that it is most appropriate that they share the devil’s fate.⁶¹

Finally, hell will complete the subjugation of the wicked to God and their humiliation before him. Edwards often connects divine sovereignty to damnation, depicting God as exercising his sovereign prerogative supremely in respect to salvation. For the purpose of manifesting his rule, evil must be subjugated: “He hath undertaken to subdue impenitent sinners. . . . Now they will not own that he is the Lord; but they shall know it.”⁶² Moreover, by God’s treatment of them there, hell will also make clear how little value the wicked have for him. Even the titles of some sermons make this aspect of hell very obvious: “Wicked Men Useful in Their Destruction Only” along with “Wicked Men Answer the End of their Beings in No Other Way But in Their Suffering.”⁶³ They will realize in hell that “they are nothing, and less than nothing, in the hands of an angry God.”⁶⁴ A total inability to bear the punishment will show the wicked soul what it is alongside God—a worm.⁶⁵ Along with their strong aversion to hell rooted in commonly inculcated notions of self-worth, modern people are often convinced of their autonomy from all constraint, including God’s.⁶⁶ For those with such narcissistic tendencies, perhaps the doctrine of hell can have a chastening effect even in this life.

Nevertheless, the revelation of the wicked in hell ultimately reflects back on God and becomes another way that God glorifies himself. Bombaro discourses on the fate of the wicked in Edwards’s thought: “Their progressive ontological ‘ugliness’ offers an eternal aesthetic contribution to God’s complex beauty . . . God enlarges His being in the domain of hell through, in, and upon damned agents.”⁶⁷ For Edwards, human history itself, culminating in an eternal heaven and hell, is more about God manifesting himself through history than it is about humanity’s ultimate end in history.⁶⁸ Stout appreciates that Edwards sees all of history revolving around three worlds: heaven, hell, and earth.⁶⁹ Hell will be an essential part of the climax of the work of redemption, which Edwards saw as the central purpose of God in history. He saw damnation as essential to fulfilling that work fully and expected the earth to be the scene of igniting the lake of fire, since this was the sphere of the

⁶⁰ Edwards, *Works*, vol. 2 (Banner of Truth) 81.

⁶¹ Edwards, *Torments of Hell* 13.

⁶² Edwards, *Works*, vol. 2 (Banner of Truth) 780–91.

⁶³ Edwards, *Unless You Repent* 53–62.

⁶⁴ Edwards, *Works*, vol. 2 (Banner of Truth) 82.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 80.

⁶⁶ Davidson, “Four Faces of Self-love” 94–99.

⁶⁷ Bombaro, “Beautiful Beings” 256.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 209.

⁶⁹ Stout, “Edwards as Revivalist” 134–36.

activity of the wicked, as well as of the devil.⁷⁰ In hell, God's triumph over wickedness will reach its zenith.

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Regrettably, a lot of Edwards scholarship has done more to obscure and misrepresent his thought than to illuminate it. There is a definite tendency among scholars to downplay aspects of his thought which they find unattractive, while highlighting themes that they happen to like or even attributing to Edwards ideas that they favor. Nowhere has this been more true than in regard to his views on hell. At best, modifying or rejecting his views on hell is sloppy scholarship, and at worst, it is intellectual dishonesty. Scholars who fail to grasp the significance of hell in Edwards's theology are likely also to fail to comprehend the whole of his thought, since hell is an integral part of it. Whatever else he was, Edwards was a theologian of a damning God. In that sense, the former stereotype of him as a man preoccupied with hell may not be all that far off the mark after all. It would be more accurate to say that Edwards was obsessed with knowing the character of the God who manifests himself in such awesome acts as eternal vengeance on his enemies. Though Edwards's lurid descriptions of the terrors of hell seem extreme to many, God's transcendent greatness convinced Edwards himself that he could not possibly exaggerate hell's horror in words.⁷¹

The conventional objection to hell is that it gives God a contradictory and divided nature—love and wrath, grace and severity. In contrast, Edwards considered hell to be an essential instrument for revealing what Bombaro calls the “complex beauty” of God, showing him as Judge and Avenger as well as Redeemer and Savior.⁷² As the second member of the Trinity, Christ is included in this project, and his gospel contains the aspect of final judgment of the wicked.⁷³ So to omit hell from the scheme of things would be to eliminate from God the Son an important facet of His glory, too.

Jonathan Edwards understood that the battle for hell went far beyond arguments for and against the existence of hell. Moreover, he did not think of hell as simply a useful tool for scaring people into taking an interest in salvation.⁷⁴ The significance of hell extended to considerations about the divine nature and anthropology, involving questions about original sin and free will. Without any concurrent defense of those concepts, the doctrine of hell would also be indefensible. And conversely, abandoning the idea of hell necessarily leads to radical alterations in traditional Christian understandings of God and humankind. This is something that modern critics of the doctrine of hell rarely seem to appreciate.

⁷⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 9: *A History of the Work of Redemption* (ed. John F. Wilson; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 505–6.

⁷¹ Gerstner, *Rational Biblical Theology* 507.

⁷² Bombaro, “Beautiful Beings” 256–57.

⁷³ Ibid. 258.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 261.

It seems inevitable that when the doctrine of hell is weakened or missing in theology, other elements will change significantly as well. Separate doctrines are parts of an ideological complex that stand or fall together. Fiering connected ethical humanism with the rejection of hell by many writers in the eighteenth century. A philosophy which elevates human virtue will certainly be repelled by the idea of hell. Likewise, a theology that makes affection for humankind into the chief characteristic of God will have difficulty reconciling itself to hell. It is no coincidence that the current popular brands of self-actualizing Christianity find little use for hell. An age of religious humanism and spiritual utilitarianism is naturally unfriendly to a concept like hell.

For similar reasons, the idea of divine transcendence is very much out of favor nowadays. By removing God completely from the realm of human sentiment and manipulation, a strong doctrine of hell can become a remedy for an all-too-immanent deity. A God who sentences humans to eternal damnation makes it terribly clear that human happiness is not something of ultimate value to him. He can exist comfortably without it. He also can display loving grace and delight in doing so, but not because he is unable to tolerate extreme suffering in the name of justice. This view of God contrasts sharply with the orientation of a lot of church ministry in recent decades. As Holifield explains, church leaders in the US have moved steadily away from a God-centered, soul-saving ministry and toward a therapeutic, humanity-centered pastoral approach.⁷⁵ Clearly, psychotherapeutic thinking has intruded into the province of theology, resulting in a severe weakening of the concept of divine transcendence. Reacting to a pop psychologist promising that “God wants you to have it all” in this life, one critic laments this “stripping of transcendence and sublimity from religion.”⁷⁶ In a therapeutic worldview, hell becomes a sin against human happiness and self-fulfillment, not an expression of divine greatness. As a result, much of the Christian world now generally discards divine transcendence and with it a strong doctrine of hell.

However, for those with eyes to see it, there is something very impressive about Edwards’s contemplations of hell. In his thought, hell distances God from his human creation in a way that firmly establishes his transcendence. He may be the immanent source of all being, but he also transcends created being in profound ways. This prevents him from becoming a sentimental figure of therapeutic religious piety or the personification of nature worship, which are the lesser gods that inhabit a lot of contemporary religious literature and thought. In a universe that includes hell, divine glory manifestly does not hinge on human approval or well-being, since even the doom of the wicked can augment it. And unquestionably, hell enhances the meaning and urgency of salvation from that doom in Christ.

⁷⁵ E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1983).

⁷⁶ Stewart Justman, *Fool’s Paradise: The Unreal World of Pop Psychology* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005) 60.