

Sermon: Are we still sinners in the hand of an angry God?

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles Ottawa, September 14, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“Sinners in the hand of an angry God” is the title of a sermon, preached by Jonathan Edwards in 1741, first to his own congregation in Massachusetts, then again in Enfield, Connecticut to profound effect. This sermon and others preached by Edwards were credited as the catalyst of the First Great Awakening, or in some circles the Evangelical Revival of the 1730’s and 40’s.

The sermon itself is widely published and studied, at the time, even till now. When I was undergoing seminary study at Knox College, “Sinners in the hand of an angry God” was a must read, not necessarily to emulate but to understand and perhaps appreciate.

There are a number of doctrines highlighted in that sermon: 1) All have sinned! As declared by the Apostle Paul in Romans 3:23, “*all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*”. 2) The wickedness of humanity cannot be tolerated by God, who is holy and righteous and just. 3) God may cast the wicked into Hell at any given moment, for eternal suffering in burning sulphur is what the wicked truly deserve. 4) It is only by God’s grace that we are held back from sliding into Hell, and that grace can be withdrawn from us at any given moment. 5) Only through the covenant of grace in Christ could individuals and humankind be saved from Hell.

Upon careful reading of this text, one would quickly realize, despite its title, God actually did not come across as angry or frightening. Rather, it was Satan and his hellish hordes, who are ever so frightful and menacing, circling around humanity, ready to pounce at any moment on their pray, snatching human souls to eternal damnation. Given the pervasive depiction of Hell in medieval literatures and arts, think of Dante’s *Infernal* (1321) or Jan Van Eyck’s *The Last Judgment* (1441), it really did not take much to rile up the populace, with vivid sermon depictions of Hell. But it was the grace of God, the comfort it projected that really moved the people.

Rev. Stephen Williams who was in attendance during the Enfield sermon, later wrote about it in his diary, describing it as “a most awakening sermon”. This is what he wrote,

“Before the sermon was done there was a great moaning and crying out through the whole house — "What shall I do to be saved?" "Oh, I am going to hell!" "Oh what shall I do for a Christ?" and so forth — so that the minister was obliged to desist. Shrieks and cries were piercing and amazing. After some time of waiting, the congregation were still, so that a prayer was made by Mr. Wheelock, and after that we descended from the pulpit and discoursed with the people, some in one place and some in another. And amazing and astonishing: the power of God was seen and several souls were hopefully wrought upon that night, and oh the cheerfulness and pleasantness of their countenances that received comfort. Oh that God would strengthen and confirm! We sang a hymn and prayed, and dispersed the assembly.”

Isn't that amazing? Certainly as seminary students in the Presbyterian tradition are trained to never use frightful imageries to 'scare' people into faith, and we (myself included) are taught to focus on and to preach grace. Nevertheless, one has to be amazed that a preached sermon had the power to move not just one or two, but the whole audience, and an entire generation into taking God and taking their faith serious. One has to be amazed at the genuine outpouring of repentance, of the determination to do better, to be better, to their loved ones, their neighbours, to the world.

Fast forward to today. I think a discourse on the validity of hell would not so helpful nor relevant. But I do believe this question deserves our utmost attention: Are we still sinners in the hand of an angry God?

The passage in Jeremiah 4 is a helpful reminder. Jeremiah prophesied in the dying days of Judah around the 6th century BCE. The northern kingdom of Israel had already fallen, in the hand of the Assyrians, more than a century earlier. Now Southern Kingdom of Judah is facing an even more powerful and deadlier foe, of the fast rising and fast approaching Babylonians.

Jeremiah was appointed by God as a prophet over nations and kingdoms, to speak plainly and truthfully words put into his mouth by God, *“to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant”* (Jeremiah 1:10). The young prophet discerned, correctly might I add, that the time of winnowing or cleansing, of giving warning to the people of God was over. The hot wind from the desert was too strong for that—it was

already too late. Instead, the only thing left for this young prophet to do was to pronounce judgement against the people, and lament for a nation whose crimes, sins and stupidity had led to disaster that was surely to come.

Speaking on behalf of God, the prophet lamented in verse 22, *“For my people are foolish; they do not know me; they are stupid children; they have no understanding.”* Here Jeremiah echoes the words of Isaiah, who proclaimed in his opening chapter, “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master’s crib, but Israel does not know; my people do not understand.” (Isaiah 1:2-3) Like a country suffering from national amnesia, the people of God had forgotten to whom they belong, and to whom they must ultimately answer to. Instead of doing good, of seeking justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with and before God, Israel became skilled in doing evil.

Here in chapter 4, the prophet did not lay out the exact evil committed by the people; he would do so in other laments, other parts of the book. But here, Jeremiah lays out the consequences of those evil, as: *“I looked on the earth, and it was complete chaos, and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger.”* (Jeremiah 4:23-26)

God was exceedingly angry, and his anger burned against the people, and the people suffered accordingly. The challenge for this young prophet was to proclaim a message not of redemptive suffering, but of what Emmanuel Levinas, a Jewish existential philosopher, called “useless suffering”. For there is no redemptive value in such suffering, in the face of God’s burning anger. Like a wildfire sweeping over a parched terrain, one can only shelter in place, perhaps cover oneself with a wet blanket and hope for the best.

When I look at the world as it is now, I can’t help but also lament. I lament over the growing homeless population, of multitude who could not afford a simple and decent place to live. I lament over the fentanyl crisis that has swept over our cities and the tragedy of so many lives lost, while politicians fight over what can be done. I lament over the loss of civility between people, first in the twitter-sphere, but now spilling over to real-life interactions. I lament over our inability to hold a decent disagreement without resorting to cancelling one another, or worse killing those whom

you disagree. I lament over Ukraine, or Gaza, or Sudan, or the latest Qatar; or anywhere else that war has broken out. I lament over the earth overheating due to man-made pollution, and humanity's refusal to acknowledge culpability, even in face of overwhelming scientific evidence. I used to lament of the triumph of science over faith, I know realize people have become so cynical that even hard science can no longer hold sway.

I can go on listing all the things that I lament about this world, but most of all, I lament over our inability to understand that God too laments for us. In giving voice to grief, sorrow and despair through lament, Jeremiah is demonstrating to us that God too laments for us, not just for us but with us.

I don't know if God is still angry with us, but I do know that we are still sinners, individually or collectively, morally or ethically, the sinful condition of humanity seem intractable, but all is not lost.

All is not lost for I subscribe to the three truth insisted by Walter Wink, a renowned contemporary theologian and biblical scholar, and they are true simultaneously: 1) the world is good; 2) the world is fallen; 3) the world is being redeemed by a God of mercy and grace. God did not send his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to the world for no good reason. God did not set out to redeem the world through Christ, only to change his mind and destroy it later, out of anger. There is a plan, a grand, overall design that all things happen as they should, and in time will be brought to fruition and completion. All is not lost!

As the Apostle Paul so aptly put it, in 1 Timothy 1:15, "*that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost.*" Perhaps repentance is still the key, that opens the door to the way of Christ. Perhaps what is really needed is not just personal repentance, of changing one's own way, of acknowledging one's own inability to save oneself, and bowing down before the divine. Perhaps what is really needed is a collective repentance, a national 'SOS' before God, save our souls for we acknowledge that we have really made a mess of things, and we don't really know how to fix it.

But in faith we profess that you O Lord, is still the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. For you are still the refuge of the poor and the poor in spirit. In you O God, we still trust.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**