

## **God's Flamming Glory – Post 16 – God's Glory in Wrath and Hell, According to Jonathan Edwards**

We have covered Edwards' understanding of God's glory as His Triune goodness communicated to His church. We saw him write in wonderful terms about God's Triune glory before creation, in creation, in redemption, and in union with Christ. Now we turn to something far more controversial, seeking from Edwards an answer to the question: How does God's glory mesh with wrath and hell?

### **God's Glory in Wrath and Hell**

Despite all of this (all of what Edwards has said on the glory of God), there is a dark cloud which hangs over Edwards. No, greater still, there is a dark cloud which hangs over Christ. It would be a betrayal of Edwards, Jesus, and the readers of this series of blog posts to skip over this issue, namely, What does God's glory have to do with hell and wrath? Why would such a good Triune God – as revealed in Jesus – have created hell and damn sinners there for eternity? Edwards (and Jesus) have answers.

Edwards preached hell. He preached wrath. And he did it because Jesus did (in His earthly ministry) and does (today in His Word). Edwards did not sugar coat these realities because Jesus did not and does not. It must be put plainly: *Edwards preached so fiercely on wrath and hell, not in spite of His doctrine of Triune glory, but precisely because of it.*<sup>1</sup> The Triune God of love simultaneously makes redemption infinitesimally glorious, and hell infinitely terrifying because He is good. Until human beings are brought to see God in this way, and

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<sup>1</sup> Other theologians have, of course, held to the same belief: “God is angry at evil *because* he loves and because there is no evil in his eternal life. His wrath proves the sincerity and potency of his love, showing us that he truly *cares* about goodness!” [Daniel Hames & Michael Reeves (2022). *God Shines Forth: How the Nature of God Shapes and Drives the Mission of the Church*. Crossway. Wheaton, IL. p. 59.

understand why He is as He truly is, “they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to Him”<sup>2</sup> – neither for justification or sanctification – and ministers of the Gospel should not expect them to do so.<sup>3</sup>

Edwards did not conspire to put people in terrible fits of fear. Jonathan was not a monster – a sinner with shortcomings, to be sure, but not a monster. Edwards was not a preacher of “terror evangelism” the way many present it.<sup>4</sup> No, Jonathan Edwards preached the wrath of God (which reveals His justice) *so that* people might discover the grace of God. He preached God in all of His attributes because it is within the perfect harmony of these attributes *within the Trinity* that communicates the glory of God. Whatever anyone thinks of his methods, that is the theological reasoning behind why he preached as he did.

It is the will of God, that the discoveries of his terrible majesty, and awful holiness and justice, should accompany the discoveries of his grace and love, in order that he may give to his creatures worthy and just apprehensions of himself. It is the glory of God, that these attributes are united in the divine nature, that as he is a being of infinite mercy and love and grace, so he is a being of infinite and tremendous majesty, and awful holiness and justice. The perfect and harmonious union of these attributes, in the divine nature, is

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin (1960). *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume One* (John T. McNeill, Ed.). Westminster John Know Press. Louisville KY. p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> It is argued by select theologians – whom are deserving of great appreciation on this issue – who make the case that Edwards’ preaching changed over the years on this issue. They make the case that the “unflinching exposition of... hell” [Daniel Hames & Michael Reeves (2022). *God Shines Forth: How the Nature of God Shapes and Drives the Mission of the Church*. Crossway. Wheaton, IL. p. 124] that manifested in his earlier preaching (such as in *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* which he preached on July 8, 1741) was dialed back later on (especially because of his interactions with David Brainerd). This essay does not contend that point, nor is there reason to. For though Edwards may have dialed it back, and been convinced that people could be convicted of sin and converted without great threats of judgement, the theme is still very present in Edwards’ preaching after his encounters with David Brainerd. This essay only seeks to understand why Edwards held to *the theology* he did, not why he used *the method of preaching* which he did, or how that changed over time.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Zahnd (2015, July 8). *Sinners In the Hands of a Loving God*. Brianzahnd.com.  
<https://brianzahnd.com/2015/07/sinners-in-the-hands-of-a-loving-god/#:~:text=Sinners%20In%20the%20Hands%20of%20a%20Loving%20God,tenderly%20I%20wait%20for%20him.%20%E2%80%93Jeremiah%20%28Jeremiah%2031%3A20%29>

what constitutes the chief part of their glory. God’s awful and terrible attributes, and his mild and gentle attributes, reflect glory one on the other; and the exercise of the one is in the perfect consistency and harmony with that of the other.<sup>5</sup>

Edwards held that the evilness of sin is shown in that sin is against “so glorious a God.”<sup>6</sup> It was never *apart from*, but *within* the conviction and sense of God’s loveliness and excellence that sin appears odious and becomes bitter.<sup>7</sup> He held that the only way sinners come under any Gospel conviction, or the truth of the Gospel itself, was through a sight of God’s glory in the Gospel – God saving sinners by His grace alone.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, God sends His Gospel out into all the world through His messengers – His own children – and the response of sinners is suppression, ridicule, and persecution. God in His glory as revealed in Jesus on the cross appears to be foolishness to them. They do not understand it, much less accept it, because of their own hostility against the Triune God of Scripture.<sup>9</sup> If Scripture were not sufficient to prove these things, the sad catalog of human speculative religion throughout history would suffice. Though God reveals Himself as good and kind even in His creation, sinners by nature “have strange notions about a Deity... Attributing vices to God [the Creator].” All men in their sinfulness grope around in the dark like the men of Sodom searching

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 2304.

<sup>6</sup> “A man cannot truly know the evil of sin against God, except it be by a discovery of his glory and excellence; and then he will be sensible how great an evil it is to sin against him. Yet it cannot be denied that natural men are capable of a conviction of their desert of hell, or that their consciences may be convinced of it without a sight of God’s glory” [Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 2299].

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 1354.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 1355.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 416.

for the door.<sup>10</sup> “Men are ready to despise the gospel,” and entertain no notions of what is morally excellent to God, because they suppress His grace shed abroad in the world and in His Law, and therefore have no respect for either. And oh, how confounding it is to them when they hear the truth of the Gospel. “Who would have thought of a trinity of persons in the Godhead; and that one should sustain the rights of the Godhead; and another should be the Mediator; and another should make application of redemption?”<sup>11</sup> What a great weight of sin there is when sinners reject such a God as He, who freely offers Himself in His grand design of redemption!

This was Edwards’ backdrop behind wrath and hell. It was within God’s completely good creation, which He made to communicate Himself, that rebels arose against Him. God did not in any way remove the sight and sense of the goodness of His glory in the garden at the Fall, but mankind rebelled against the naked goodness of God, and left fellowship with Him entering into death, forsaking the Fountain of their life and goodness, forsaking the Triune God with no just cause for such rebellion merited from Him whatsoever.

Soon after the world was created, evil entered into the world in the fall of the angels and man. Presently after God had made rational creatures, there were enemies who rose up against him from among them; and in the fall of man evil entered into this lower world; where also God’s enemies rose up against him.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, such is the kindness of God that, out of the Fallen human race, He had already foreordained to redeem undeserving sinners from the sin and death which they had wrought.

Such is the merciful graciousness of the Triune God that He showered His kindness upon all

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<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 417.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 418.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 2046.

humanity. Such was His loving kindness with which He loved His elect in Christ that He ordained such a grand design of redemption. And He has done so in such a way that He has suffered to communicate His glory in His Son to both the elect *and* to those who will remain in their hostility against Him.

God, in infinite mercy to lost sinners, has provided a way for them to escape future misery, and to obtain eternal life. For that end he has given his only-begotten Son, a person infinitely glorious and honourable in himself being equal with God, and infinitely near and dear to God ... Him he gave to be incarnate, to suffer death, to be made a curse for us, and to undergo the dreadful wrath of God in our room, and thus to purchase for us eternal glory ... This glorious person has been offered to you times without number... When he has thus offered himself to you as your Saviour, you never freely and heartily accept of him. This love which you have thus abused, is as great as that wrath of which you are in danger. If you would have accepted of it, you might have had the enjoyment of this love instead of enduring this terrible wrath: so that the misery you have heard of is not greater than the love you have despised, and the happiness and glory which you have rejected.<sup>13</sup>

It was because sin is against this glorious God – who goes to such great lengths and through so great a misery to save unworthy sinners – that Edwards preached so strikingly on hell and wrath. It was because sinners rejected this beautifully glorious God revealed in Christ that Edwards preached so fiercely: “This love which you have thus abused, is as great as that wrath of which you are in danger.”

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 2445.

Yet, there is another reason Edwards preached this. God's wrath is not evil. Nor is wrath antithetical to God's glory as the Triune God, as somehow divorced from His goodness. When God presents His wrath in Scripture, it is not only for the satisfaction of His justice, but for the sake of His church. As Edwards put it in one place, "the works of God's vindictive justice and wrath are spoken of as works of mercy to his people."<sup>14</sup>

In eternity, God will fix "the church's enemies in endless misery."<sup>15</sup> She herself will be presented with Christ to the Father, and "there to enjoy this most unspeakable and inconceivable glory and blessedness."<sup>16</sup> Because He is a loving husband, Christ will not suffer those who hate and war against His beloved to go unpunished. More than this, because Jesus loves His Father, He will not let those who have spurned His Father's love to go unpunished. The same is true of the Father for the Son and the Spirit and the church; and likewise true of the Spirit for the Father and the Son and His church.

In this way, the misery that will be poured out of the reprobate for eternity will be the Triune God's wrath. The ultimate end of God will still be accomplished in spite of the sinfulness of the reprobate: "glorifying his love" and "the shining forth of God's glory, and the communication of his goodness," to His Beloved and those in Him in wrath towards them.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 841.

<sup>15</sup> In another place he writes that "'one great design of God, in the affair of redemption, was to subdue those enemies...' or, 'to put all God's enemies under his feet, and that his goodness may finally appear triumphant over all evil'" [Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 2046].

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 2269.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 1507-1508.

For this reason, it is not in the destruction of sinners *alone* that God is glorified, but in the destruction of sinners when God had “executed vengeance on His own dear Son.”<sup>18</sup> “The revenging justice of God is a great deal more manifested in the death of Christ, than it would have been if all mankind had been sufferers to all eternity.”<sup>19</sup> Why? Why when God’s Triune glory seems to require rebellious sinners’ destruction has He made a way for salvation?<sup>20</sup> Because it is not a theatrical glory that God displays. It is a communicative, sacrificial glory that He delights to share.

If all mankind had stood guilty, and justice had called for vengeance upon them, that would not have been such a trial of the inflexibleness and unchangeableness of the justice of God, as when his own Son, who was the object of his infinite love, and in whom he infinitely delighted, stood with the imputation of guilt upon him.

This was the greatest trial that could be, to manifest whether God’s justice was perfect and unchangeable, or not; whether God was so just that he would not upon any account abate of what justice required; and whether God would have any respect to persons in judgment.<sup>21</sup>

Those sinners who accept Jesus as Lord and Savior are welcomed into the fellowship of Triune glory. Those sinners who reject Him are made to show the good glory of God by undergoing His wrath forever.

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<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 402.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 403.

<sup>20</sup> “So has the wisdom of God contrived that those attributes are glorified in man’s salvation, whose glory seemed to require his destruction” [Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 402].

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 403.

How, it may be asked, will there be joy in heaven when those who are Christians' families and friends, according to the flesh, are in such misery? Because the hand of God's kindness towards them will be withdrawn, and the sustaining of their blessedness will be removed, and they will appear as what they would be without His grace: His enemies. For in hell, God will not remove His glory. His glory will be very present.<sup>22</sup> The damned, however, will not see any of the beauty or excellence of this glory. Yes, they will

see and know that he is perfectly just, righteous, and true; and that he is a holy God, of purer eyes than to behold evil, who cannot look on iniquity; and they will see the wonderful manifestations of his infinite goodness and free grace to the saints. Nothing will be hid from their eyes, but [they will not love Him for] the beauty of these moral attributes.<sup>23</sup>

They will only weep and gnash their teeth.

How will the saints bear the sight or thought of such misery? They will be overwhelmed by the love of the Triune God for them. For, "with respect to any affection that the godly have had to the finally reprobate, the love of God will wholly swallow it up, and cause it wholly to cease."<sup>24</sup> In this the saints will wholly find their family in Christ, and have their tears wiped away.

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<sup>22</sup> For "God will make all his enemies to behold this, and to live in a most clear and affecting view of it, to all eternity. God hath often declared his immutable purpose to make all his enemies to know him in this respect, in so often annexing these words to the threatenings he denounces against them, 'And they shall know that I am the Lord...'" [Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 1326].

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 1326.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 2476.

If God in his providence calls his people to mourn over lost relations, and if he repeats his stroke and takes away one after another of those that were dear to him; it is a supporting, refreshing consideration to think, that Christ has declared that he will be in the stead of all relations unto those who trust in him. They are as his mother, and sister, and brother; he has taken them into a very near relation to himself: and in every other afflictive providence, it is a great comfort to a believing soul to think that he has an intercessor with God, that by him he can have access with confidence to the throne of grace, and that in Christ we have so many great and precious promises, that all things shall work together for good, and shall issue in eternal blessedness. God's people, whenever they are scorched by afflictions as by hot sun-beams, may resort to him, who is as a shadow of a great rock, and be effectually sheltered, and sweetly refreshed.<sup>25</sup>

God is both great in goodness and good in His greatness. All of His great power He uses for the good of His Bride who are most undeserving of it. On them He pours out His Spirit without measure.<sup>26</sup> And all those who have spurned His goodness, and trampled over the cross to enter everlastingly into hell, will experience the full weight of His greatness for the purpose of His goodness.<sup>27</sup>

O who can conceive of the dreadfulness of the wrath of an Almighty God! Everything in God is answerable to his infinite greatness. When God shows mercy, he shows mercy like

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<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 2576.

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 1320-1321.

<sup>27</sup> When God does this, as Edwards wrote commenting on Romans 9:22-23, there is “*another* reason of the destruction of the wicked, *viz. showing the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy: higher degrees* of their glory and happiness, in a relish of their own enjoyments, and a greater sense of their value, and of God's free grace in bestowing them” [Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume One*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 842].

a God. His love is infinitely desirable, because it is the love of God. And so when he executes wrath it is like a God. This God will pour out without mixture.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Edwards (n.d.). *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 2268.