

(4) That the reason why they are not fallen already, and do not fall now is only that God's appointed time has not come. For it is said, that when that "due time," or appointed time comes, **their foot shall slide**. Then they shall be left to fall, as they are inclined by their own weight. God will not hold them up in these slippery places any longer, but will let them go; and then, at that very instant, they shall fall into destruction.

The observation from these words is this: **There is nothing that keeps wicked men at any one moment out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God.** By the mere pleasure of God, I mean his **sovereign** pleasure, his arbitrary will, restrained by no obligation, and hindered by no difficulty. The truth of this observation may appear by the following considerations:

(1) There is no want of **power** in God to cast wicked men into hell at any moment. Men's hands cannot be strong, when God rises up. The strongest have no power to resist him, nor can any deliver out of his hands. He is not only able to cast wicked men into hell, but he can most easily do it. Sometimes an earthly prince meets with a great deal of difficulty in subduing a rebel, who has found means to fortify himself, and has made himself strong by the number of his followers. But it is not so with God.

There is no fortress that is any defense from the power of God. Though hand join in hand, and a vast multitude of God's enemies combine and associate themselves, they are easily broken in pieces. They are as great heaps of light chaff before the whirlwind, or large quantities of dry stubble before devouring flames. We find it easy to tread on and crush a worm that we find crawling on us; so it is easy for us to cut or singe a slender thread that anything hangs by; and just as easy is it for God when he pleases, to cast his enemies into hell. What are we, that we should think to stand before him, at whose rebuke the earth trembles, and before whom the rocks are thrown down (*Nahum 1:2-6*)?

(2) They **deserve** to be cast into hell. Divine justice never stands in the way. It makes no objection against God's using his

power at any moment to destroy them. Yea, on the contrary, justice calls aloud for an infinite punishment of their sins. Divine justice says of the tree that brings forth such grapes of Sodom, "Cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?" (*Luke 13:7*). The sword of divine justice is every moment brandished over their heads, and it is nothing but the hand of a sovereign God that holds it back.

(3) They are **already** under a sentence of **condemnation** to hell. They do not only justly deserve to be cast down thither, but the sentence of the law of God, that eternal and immutable rule of righteousness that God has fixed between him and mankind, is gone out against them, and stands against them; so that they are bound over already to hell. "He that believeth not is condemned already" (*John 3:18*). Every unconverted man properly belongs to hell. That is his place; from thence he is. "Ye are from beneath" (*John 8:23*); and thither he is bound. It is the place that justice, and God's Word, and sentence of his unchangeable law, assign to him.

(4) They are **now** the objects of that very same anger and wrath of God, that is expressed in the torments of hell. "**God is angry with the wicked every day**" (*Psalms 7:11*). 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 at present very angry with them; as he is with many miserable creatures now tormented in hell, who there feel and bear the fierceness of his wrath.

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 a one as themselves, though they may imagine him to be so (*Psalms 50:21-23*). 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 whetted, and held over them (*Psalms 7:12-13*), and the pit hath opened its mouth under them.

(5) The **devil** stands ready to fall upon them and seize them as his own, at what moment God shall permit him. They belong to

him; he has their souls in his possession, and under his dominion. The Scripture represents them as "his goods" (*Luke 11:21*). The devils watch them; they are ever by them, at their right hand. They stand waiting for them, like greedy hungry lions, that see their prey, and expect to have it, but are for the present kept back. If God should withdraw his hand, by which they are restrained, they would in one moment fly upon their poor souls. The old serpent is gaping for them; hell opens its mouth wide to receive them; and if God should permit it, they would be hastily swallowed up and gone.

(6) There are in the souls of wicked men those **hellish principles reigning**, that would presently kindle and flame out into hell fire, if it were not for God's restraints. There is laid in the very nature of carnal men a foundation for the torments of hell. There are those corrupt principles, in reigning power in them, and in full possession of them, that are seeds of hell fire. The principles are active and powerful, exceedingly violent in their nature; and if it were not for the restraining hand of God upon them, they would soon break out. They would flame out after the same manner as the same corruption, the same enmity does in the hearts of damned souls, and would beget the same torments as they do in them.

The souls of the wicked are in Scripture compared to the troubled sea (*Isaiah 57:20*). For the present, God restrains their wickedness by his mighty power, as he does the raging waves of the troubled sea, saying, "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further" (*Job 38:11*). But if God should withdraw that restraining power, it would soon carry all before it. Sin is the ruin and misery of the soul; it is destructive in its nature; and if God should leave it without restraint, there would need nothing else to make the soul perfectly miserable. The corruption of the heart of man is immoderate and boundless in its fury; and while wicked men live here, it is like fire pent up by the course of nature; and as the heart is now a sink of sin, so, if sin was not restrained, it would immediately turn the soul into a fiery oven, or a furnace of fire and brimstone.

(7) It is **no security** to wicked men for one moment that there are no visible means

of death at hand! It is no security to a natural man, that he is now in health, and that he does not see which way he should immediately go out of the world by an accident, and that there is no visible danger, in any respect, in his circumstances. The manifold and continual experience of all the world, in all ages, shows this is no evidence that a man is not on the very brink of eternity and that his next step will not be into another world.

The unseen, unthought-of ways and means of persons going out of the world are innumerable and inconceivable. Unconverted men walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering, and there are innumerable places in this covering so weak, 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 to go out of the ordinary course of his providence to destroy any wicked man at any moment.

(8) Natural men's prudence and care to preserve their own lives, or the care of others to preserve them, **does not secure them a moment**. To this, divine providence and universal experience do bear testimony. There is the clear evidence that men's own wisdom is no security for them from death; for if it were otherwise, we would see some difference between the wise and politic men of the world and others, with regard to their liability to early and unexpected death; but how is it in fact? "How dieth the wise man? as the fool?" (*Eccles 2:16*).

(9) All wicked men's pains and contrivances which they use to escape hell, while they continue to reject Christ, and so remain wicked men, **do not secure them from hell one moment**. Almost every natural man that hears of hell, flatters himself that he shall escape it; he depends upon himself for his own security; he flatters himself in what he has done, in what he is now doing, or what he intends to do. Every one lays out matters in his own mind, how he shall avoid damnation, and flatters himself that he contrives well for himself, and that his schemes will not fail.

They hear indeed that there are but "few" saved, and that the greater part of men that have died heretofore, are gone to hell (*Math 7:13-14; Luke 13:23-24*); but each one imagines that he forms plans to effect his escape better than others have done. He does not intend to go to that place of torment; he says within himself, that he intends to take effectual care, and orders matters so for himself as not to fail.

But the foolish children of men miserably delude themselves in their own schemes, and in confidence in their own strength and wisdom; they trust to nothing but a shadow. The greater part of those who have lived before under the same means of grace, and are now dead, are undoubtedly gone to hell; and it was not because they were not as wise as those now alive; it was not because they did not lay out matters as well for themselves to secure their own escape.

If we could go and speak to them, and inquire of them, one by one, whether they expected, when alive, and when they used to hear about hell, ever to be subjects of that misery, we, doubtless, should hear one after another reply, "No, I never intended to come here; I had arranged matters otherwise in my mind; I thought I should contrive well for myself; I thought my scheme good. I intended to take effectual care; but it came upon me unexpectedly; I did not look for it at the time, and in that manner; it came as a thief. Death outwitted me; God's wrath was too quick for me. O my cursed foolishness! I was flattering myself, and pleasing myself with vain dreams of what I thought I would do hereafter; and when I was saying peace and safety, then sudden destruction came upon me" (*1 Thess 5:3*).

(10) God has laid himself under **no obligation**, by any promise, to keep any natural man out of hell for one moment. God certainly has made no promises either of eternal life, or of any deliverance or preservation from eternal death, but what are contained in the promises given in Christ, in whom all the promises of God are "yea" and "amen" (*2 Cor 1:19-20*).

Whatever some have imagined and pretended about promises made to natural men's earnest seeking and knocking, it is

plain and manifest, that whatever pains a natural man takes in religion, whatever prayers he makes, till he is found in Christ, God is under no obligation to keep him a moment from eternal destruction.

Thus it is that natural men are held in the hand of God over the pit of hell; they deserve the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked; his anger is as great towards them as those that are actually suffering the execution 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 for one moment. The devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about 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; there are no means within reach that can be any security to them. In short they have no refuge, nothing to take hold of; all that preserves them at any moment is the mere arbitrary will, and uncovenanted, unobliged forbearance of an incensed God.

The use of this awful subject may be for **awakening unconverted persons** to a conviction of their danger. This that you have heard is the case of every one out of Christ. That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone, is extended abroad under you, and you have nothing to stand on, nor anything to take hold of.

You are probably not sensible of this. You find you are kept out of hell, but do not see the hand of God in it. You look at other things, as the good state of your bodily constitution, your care of your own life, and the means you use for your own preservation. But indeed these things are nothing if God should withdraw his hand.

Your wickedness makes you, as it were, heavy as lead, to rend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell, and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink, and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf; and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness, would have no more influence to uphold you, and keep you

from being damned, than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock.

The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string; and justice directs the bow to your heart, and strains at the bow: and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being drunk with your blood (*Psalms 7:12-13*). Thus all of you that have never passed under a great change of heart by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls, all of you that have never been born again, raised from the dead in sin to be "new creatures in Christ," are in the hands of an angry God.

However unconvinced you may now be of the truth of what you hear, by and by you will be fully convinced of it. The God that holds you over the pit, much in the same way as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you (*Psalms 5:5; 7:11*), 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 (*Hab 1:13*); 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, it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire at this very moment.

O sinner, consider the fearful danger you are in! 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. Therefore, let every one that is out of Christ now awake and "**flee from the wrath to come**" (*Math 3:7*). As it was in the days of John the Baptist, the axe is laid to the root of the trees, and every tree which brings not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. "Escape for your lives, look not behind you, escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed" (*Gen 19:17*). □

—A sermon by Jonathan Edwards
Enfield, Connecticut, July 8, 1741

Sinners in the hands of an Angry God

"Their foot shall slide in due time" (*Deut 32:35*)

In this verse is threatened the vengeance of God on the wicked and unbelieving Israelites, who were God's visible people, and who lived under the means of grace; but who, notwithstanding all of God's wonderful works towards them, remained void of counsel, having no understanding in them (*v 28*). Under all the cultivations of heaven, they brought forth bitter and poisonous fruit, as seen in the two verses preceding the text. The expression, "**Their foot shall slide in due time**," seems to imply the following things, relating to the punishment and destruction to which these wicked Israelites were exposed.

(1) It implies that they were always exposed to **destruction**; as one that stands or walks in slippery places is always exposed to fall. This is implied in the manner of the destruction coming upon them, being represented by their foot sliding. "Surely thou didst set them in slippery places; thou casts them down into destruction" (*Psalms 73:18*).

(2) It implies that they were always exposed to **sudden unexpected destruction**. As he that walks in slippery places is every moment liable to fall, he cannot foresee one moment whether he shall stand or fall the next; and when he does fall, he falls at once without warning. "Surely thou didst set them in slippery places; thou casts them down into destruction: How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment!" (*Psalms 73:18-19*).

(3) Another thing implied is that they are liable to fall **of themselves**, without being thrown down by the hand of another; as he that stands or walks on slippery ground needs nothing but his own weight to throw him down.