

# When the Photograph Becomes the Picture

ESSAY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
JASON DAVIS FRAZIER, MTS2

*During the 2003 summer term, 15 representatives from Vanderbilt University Divinity School traveled to the border town of Nogales Sonora in Mexico for a field education immersion experience in the political and economic circumstances that contribute to immigrants seeking better lives in the United States. The VDS delegation, in conjunction with the nonprofit organization BorderLinks, was led by Lloyd Lewis, assistant professor of the practice of ministry and assistant dean for student life, and included Andrew Barnett, Nathan Brown, Amy Cates, Brian Costilow, Mosung Eam, Karlen Evins, Nancy Jenkins, Kara Kleinschmidt, Brian McCreanor, Lindsay Meyers, Paul Noreika, Michaela Rangel, William Simmons, and Jason Frazier, from whose journal this essay was compiled.*

Two weeks have passed since I returned from Mexico, and I am just now picking up the photographs from the camera shop. I discover that one roll of film is ruined—probably from a faulty shutter on my camera. Somewhat perturbed, I get into my car and hurriedly flip through the photos. Something is missing.

The 105 pieces of photographic paper in my hands reveal nothing of the experiences I had two weeks ago. As a student of theology, I think that having directly experienced the events depicted in these photos now alters my perception of the images and restricts their meanings. I am not completely convinced by that thought. I place the photos back in the envelopes and begin driving.

I recall memories from the trip for what seems the millionth time: a 45-mile stretch of desert from Sasabe, Mexico, to the pick-up point in Arizona; immigrants, with little or no water, traversing a terrain of cactus and mesquite trees over three days. That's not that big a deal, or is it? Temperatures soar

from 110–120 degrees regularly with cloudless skies and an unrelenting sun. The area is home to rattlesnakes and coyotes. What would motivate people to endure willingly these conditions while leaving their homes and families, especially when they are aware of the risk of failure and the number of people

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who have died alone in the desert making this trek? Simple heat exhaustion or a sprained ankle will cause a person to become stranded and die. I cannot fathom this reality. Having never gone hungry or thirsty, having never experienced even a possible lacking of food or water, I am, despite having witnessed the circumstances on the border, aware of my inability to relate directly.

What value of border and separation can be worth these stakes? Life, liberty, and property? Is the United States so intent on making herself an island, only accepting the world's commodities while ignoring the world's hardships? If so, why? Homeland security? Currently I fear my home more than any other land—the land of the

*Above: Stylized sculptures made by local artisans from recycled materials depict the struggles of the Mexican immigrants who try to cross the border into the United States. Left: Drums of water placed by relief workers may be found on the American side of the border.*







*In the United States, has freedom become a four-letter word, a nihilistic fantasy, its meaning always relative to context? Freedom in the United States is ownership.*

trapped, the home of the afraid.

Looking through the barrio in Nogales Sonora, Mexico, preconceived images run through my head. I want to see more houses made of scrap pieces of plywood, used cardboard, and rusted metal sheets. There are supposed to be fewer cars and more violence. There should be children shirtless and hungry with dried grains of rice sticking to unsmiling mouths on expressionless faces. I want to see these conditions; I want experiences that will make me feel sorry and guilty for the plight of the Mexicans; I want to see a situation

for which I can blame myself; I need motivation for taking action because that's what I'm supposed to do.

My comfort is proof that justice does exist, but what can I do to ensure for those less fortunate the type of life that I have been blessed or lucky enough to have? But if I could give this type of life, would I want to?

I'm only comfortable on the outside. My commodities are a reflection of my "well-being." Oh well, I've got it better than most, I really shouldn't complain. No. I feel like an animal domesticated by its fears, no longer willing or able to live by its natural freedoms. In the United States, has freedom become a four-letter word, a nihilistic fantasy, its meaning always relative to context? Freedom in the United States is ownership.

In the morning, a mid-sized pickup truck with a bed full of five-gallon water bottles drives slowly up the road. Attached to its hood is a horn speaker blaring an enthusiastic message of which I understand only the word "agua." The passengers stop every few houses, get out, and carry a bottle of water to the door and trade for the empty bottle and payment before returning to the truck.

The sky is cloudless, the air dry and warm. The reddish brown hills sparsely covered with trees and bushes surround the valley where the center of the city sits in a cloud of dust stirred by the early morning traffic. Until traveling to Nogales, I hadn't seen a Ford Pinto in years. I imagine the dust particles are electrified bits of energy ascending from the city like a soul from a body. It is then that I realize we are in Mexico. This setting is different than the U.S. of my generation. The air is alive. The whole place inhales and exhales like one massive being, each

breath realized as if it is the last. I stand here as a participant in this being. Even if just for the second of this thought, I am not "the other" observing this place called Mexico; I am Mexico—not culturally, not economically, not in terms of material prosperity, but in humanity. The separation I had expected to feel between Mexico and myself is only material, not spiritual. The divide between my world and this has never seemed more futile than at this moment. There is no room for the self-seeking individual here.

Now, it is early evening and people are returning from a day of work. Both children and adults are outside visiting with neighbors and friends. A house a few hundred yards away on a hill has its doors and windows wide open blasting a curious mix of 'American' and Mexican pop songs. A shirtless round man stands in the doorway, his arms stretched above his head as he leans on the doorframe. Surprisingly the loud music from his home is not a disturbance to the colonia. It's as if he were appointed to share his music with the community that evening. Eventually the music fades, and families gather in their homes to pass time until going to sleep. The dust has descended back to the ground while the air turns pitch and silent. Another day has ended in Mexico, and soon enough another will begin.

In Mexico the tap water is undrinkable.

Food is often priced as high, or higher, than in the United States. American and other foreign-owned factories have taken advantage of lower labor costs, unenforced environmental regulations, and less-organized labor rights groups. Jobs are few, so people leave their homes and families to seek work in other parts of Mexico or the United States. The lack of creature comforts in Mexico is lamentable to most U.S. citizens; however, this lack cannot be used to judge the conditions of Mexico. To do so would be to ignore the existence of a vibrant Mexican culture. Yes, Mexico needs improvements, but not nearly as much as the United States.

Photography uses the medium of light and reflection to invite a relationship between a viewer and an image. A photograph is the material expression of the photographer's non-material experience and enables the viewer to experience a translation of the photographer's non-material experience. However, a photograph fails when its only value is as a picture, a 'captured' image of the material expression of the physical world. A photograph fails and becomes a picture when the viewer relates only to the properties of colors, shapes, and dimensions of the image. Honestly, I feel that U.S. culture embodies this failure. We citizens of the United States view the world as the picture at which we are looking instead of as

the photograph of which we are members.

The immersion experience places a person in an immediate relationship, as a member of the situation, without the degree of separation that exists when looking at a photograph. My realization of this failure has become the theme from this immersion experience. I went to Mexico with the mindset that I would find some strategy to help change the situation—perhaps a new economic, political, or philosophical theory using modern technology and reason. Through this experience, however, I have come to realize that we, the citizens of the U.S., do not need to look any farther than ourselves if we want "to change the world." It has become quite evident to me that our judgments concerning other cultures are based on the material conditions in relation to our own while guided by the ethnocentric nationalism that constructed the border.

*The essayist was graduated in 2002 from the University of West Florida in Pensacola where he earned a baccalaureate in philosophy and religious studies.*

*Below: Three crosses commemorate the lives of immigrants who died in their struggles to cross the borders at Arizona, Texas, and California.*



*Above: Soles of boots emerging from a mound of rocks suggest a gravesite and serve as a warning to illegal immigrants who attempt to cross the border at Sasabe. Right: A wooden cross wired to a concrete column at the border in Altar, Mexico, serves as a memorial to an immigrant. Below: An improvised foundation of rubber tires supports a tenement dwelling constructed from plywood and rusted sheets of metal.*



*...I am Mexico—not culturally, not economically, not in terms of material prosperity, but in humanity.*



# At the BEDSIDE

## Perspectives on the Good Death

In the 19th-century novel *The Death of Iván Ilých*, Russian writer Leo Tolstoy creates a portrait of a 45-year-old complacent, vain civil servant who has never contemplated the inevitability of his mortal nature. The narrator describes the life of the protagonist in a sentence which the 20th-century American poet and Vanderbilt University alumnus Randall Jarrell, BA'35, acknowledges as one of the most frightening statements in literature: "Iván Ilých's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible."

Tolstoy's stark demonstration of the futility of a life governed by superficiality continues to challenge readers to ask, "When an unreflective person such as Iván Ilých experiences the announcement of Death in the form of a terminal illness, how may one adapt to the realization of the unthinkable and prepare for a good death?" Iván's anagnorisis occurs when he becomes aware that he cannot take refuge from the truth by retreating into a decorous, inauthentic realm of social courtesies. By accepting that his existence has been molded by artificiality and has been void of any profound involvement with other people, he is able to relinquish his grip on mortality, to defeat the pain of abdominal cancer, to respond favorably to the therapeutic touch of his son's hand, and to recognize in those who attend him at



*Death in the Sickroom*  
1895  
Edward Munch  
Norwegian painter  
(1863–1944)



death the virtues of charity, ineffable goodness, and altruism. Iván experiences not a tragic demise, but a good death.

During the 2003 spring semester, the department of pastoral care at Vanderbilt University Medical Center conducted a colloquium on the question, "What is a good death?" Inspired by this theme

and the subject of palliative care, we asked nine members of the University community to exchange in this issue of *The Spire* their perspectives on the circumstances contributing to a good death and the ways in which survivors can help to create those conditions at the penultimate moment.

### Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

*Professor of Pastoral Theology and Pastoral Counseling*

One of the contributions that a Christian perspective on a good death offers is that we are prevented from too easily romanticizing death as easily accepted. The conception of a good death has been trivialized and neutralized somewhat by the secular culture of psychology, and we have come to think of the good death as a mere acceptance of death and as a natural part of life, but the Christian tradition rejects that simplistic rendition of a good death by not accepting a concise formula of stages for approaching death.

A good death is a much more complex idea in the Christian tradition because of the complicated relationship between sin and death; it is not enough to contend that death is a part of God's creation or a consequence of sin in the Fall; one may also argue that death is an offense to God's good Creation and goes against God's gift of life in the good Creation. The Christian tradition also allows us to consider that although one may be fallible, one is also unique; consequently, each individual will experience death differently, not formulaically.

In the literature on death and dying, certainly popularized by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*, one who is dying is often encouraged "to take care of unfinished business." One's life, however, is always short of the potential of the gifts one has been given by God, and because one is indeed fallible, one cannot but help to have regrets; we should not be captivated by five categories that offer us the definitive way to address unfinished business for becoming reconciled with death. In the Christian tradition, we have two other words, *hope* and *forgiveness*, which are far more complex principles than taking care of unfinished business and an acceptance of death.

One of the characteristics of a good death that I think is no longer identified with the Christian tradition involves the dying person being attended at the death bed by the survivors; in the practices of early Christianity through the medieval era, there were more rituals related to orchestrating the passage from life—persons participated in a community around the death bed. Particularly in the Protestant tradition, there is less emphasis on this practice whereas the Catholic and Jewish traditions have preserved those rituals. The experience of facing impending death forces an individual to reassess one's life in wholly unfamiliar moral and spiritual ways for which one is unprepared and inexperienced. Without religious support, one may face death and God with a confusion and dread for which one no longer has words to name or to comprehend. I believe that by attending the dying we can help an individual experience a good death by helping one arrive at the ultimate reconciliation that this unique life that has been lived—with all its mistakes and all its rich benefits—is recognized by a community, and the members comprising that community bless the life for its shortfalls and its greatness.



### Larry R. Churchill

*The Ann Geddes Stahlman Professor of Medical Ethics and Professor of Religion*

Dealing with terminal illness, with dying people, and with patients' families are among the most stressful experiences that students of medicine and theology will encounter. How do you talk to the terminally ill when you cannot cure them or give them an immediate technological or theological solution? Before one can address the social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of dying as they emerge in a clinical or religious context, one has to reflect on one's own mortality; one has to have a perspective towards one's mortal nature and how one envisions one's own good death; otherwise death remains an abstraction.

I contend that one can experience a good death if a "social death" does not precede one's biological death, if pain and suffering are minimized, and if one dies aware that a community to which one has had a relationship affirms the significance of one's life. We need to guard

*The premise of a good death is also related to fundamental human questions, not the technical questions alone.*

against allowing death to become too "medicalized" by insisting that there is always another strategy medicine can offer the dying and that we must keep trying to preserve the life until the very end.

This approach results in death becoming a medical event instead of a personal, spiritual, and family event, and I have serious reservations about a fundamentally human experience, such as death, becoming appropriated into technical categories.

When I was involved recently in making a film about family members who became the decision makers for relatives who were no longer able to participate in their health care, I discovered through my interviews with families who had experienced the death of a loved one within six months that the more difficult questions surrounding the end of life which they had to address were not questions about how aggressive to be in medical treatment—whether or not to keep one on a ventilator or to readmit one to the intensive care unit. The questions which they asked were: "Is dad really right with God; is he ready, in a fundamental spiritual sense, to die? Has he made his peace with his estranged daughter?" The families discussed the essential human dynamics of building or rebuilding communities of support at the end of life, not medical ethics decisions. The premise of a good death is also related to fundamental human questions, not the technical questions alone. Questions about the use of particular life-sustaining devices should be framed as questions of a person's basic humanity and the meaning of one's life and death, and from that context, particular answers about questions of respirators





*Death and the Miser*  
ca. 1485–90  
Hieronymus Bosch  
Dutch painter  
(ca. 1450–ca.1516)

and antibiotics will emerge.

Although we live in hope and faith instead of certainty, there are measures that survivors may take to ensure a good death for those we love. We must remember the networks of support that all of us need just to live our daily lives and that those who are dying need community much more intensely at the end of life than at other times. We also need to talk with our family, friends, physician, and pastor so people really understand what we want, as opposed to what *they* want, or what they *think* we want. An advantage of a living will is that the document provides an orientation that reflects one's values, and survivors can avoid strained conversations and recriminations if they know the extent to which their influences may be exercised. Houses of worship are an appropriate setting for encouraging families to discuss end of life care, and religious leaders can model and articulate a point of view that advanced planning in anticipation of one's death is a selfless gesture for the benefit of our survivors.

### James C. Pace, MDiv'88

*Professor of Nursing*

To answer the question "What constitutes a good death?" one must consider the four recurring themes in the current literature on end of life and palliative care. Research based on discussions with people who have contemplated the inevitability of death reveals they do not want to be a burden on their families; they do not want to die in pain; they hope to die at home, not in a hospital; and they are most afraid of a prolonged illness to which a tortuous course is attached. What would be envisioned as a good death, therefore, is that one is able to die at home with family and loved ones and where everyone communicates about what the loved one wants and that the loved one knows that the family members are trying to do all within their abilities to advance the wishes of the dying.

From my perspectives as a health care provider and as an Episcopal priest, it is profoundly regretful that people are dying in pain or are dying in hospitals against their wishes, surrounded not by family but by "life-saving technology" that really isn't helping them toward a good death. But these unfortunate circumstances may occur simply because one was not able to communicate adequately one's wishes or there was no one to whom the sick could articulate their unstated fears about death.

Instead of trying to create new life in the intensive care units, we really should be concentrating on the life well lived while making sure one's symptoms are managed and that one is not in pain.

In contemporary American society, there is seemingly an unspoken guideline that we are supposed to live forever and we can fix mortal situations, and if we cannot repair them, then we are failures. So to ask the questions "How do *you* define the terms whereby your death will be good?" or "What can we do to ensure that your death will be according to your wishes?" is rather momentous in this society, but asking the questions alone cannot ensure that communication occurs. One has to be willing to listen and not presume that one holds the definitive answers.

As one who has had the privilege of helping individuals prepare for a good death and to make the transition from this realm, I have found myself standing on the holiest of grounds. Our students in the Nursing School attend women at childbirth and experience that moment of great joy for new life, but for those of us with vocations in health care and in religious life, we, too, are attendants at the bedside—midwives who help birth a *new* life that also is filled with grace.



### Evon Olive Flesberg, PhD'96

*Lecturer in Pastoral Theology and Pastoral Counseling*

Before enrolling in a Lutheran seminary, I was taught by the example of my grandmother, Olive Ledbetter, how not to be afraid of being with someone when one died. She had been with her uncles and her loved ones when they died, and she described to me how natural it was and how death could be peaceful. By her calm attitude in the way she recounted placing pennies on the eyes of the deceased, I learned that attending to the dying would not be frightful or morbid, and as one could be present for the birth of a child, one can also be present and help one to make a good transition into the ultimate reality.

As a pastoral counselor, I cannot give a concise formula for ensuring a good death, but from my experiences in parishes and in private practice, I argue that it is important for the survivors to communicate to the dying person how that individual will be missed, that one's life—regardless of the duration—had meaning and purpose, that one loved *well*, and that as survivors, we will be guardians of one's memory. For the survivors who have the opportunity to prepare for death and the time to reflect on the preciousness of life during a death vigil, there is a special blessing in telling someone that one's life will always be appreciated.

*It is unfortunate that people die without having a chance to say out loud how they feel honestly about dying.*

It is unfortunate that people die without having a chance to say out loud how they feel honestly about dying; there is this notion that if we talk about dying, that somehow we are betraying that person. I encourage students preparing for vocations in pastoral care not to reserve the conversations about death for a minister or a rabbi but to be active listeners. I have two close friends, each of whom experienced the death of a spouse, but neither one talked with the spouse about the inevitability of dying. This absence of communication about the undeniable does not allow one to love completely, or to love well, another person to the end. In our committed relationships, we promise to love each other under all circumstances, not just the circumstances of living. It is important not to protect the dying from what you need to say, even if the message is difficult, because in expressions of anger or resentment, there are possibilities for reconciliation and forgiveness when different perspectives are exchanged and we no longer feel we have to "protect" the dying from the truth.

### Trudy Hawkins Stringer, MDiv'88

*Associate Director of Field Education and Lecturer In Church and Ministries*

There is a profound difference between a good death, and a "right" death, and I think upper-middle class culture seeks to die the right way, which is a way of saying we want to control death. An inherent danger in this attitude is that medical science can become elevated to an idol. The premise for a good death, however, is an understanding that there is no way to control death and that death is the ultimate expression of our humanity.

A good death is consonant with the radical, personal integrity of each life, so no two deaths can be alike; the good death is unique to the particularity of one's life and is graced with the recognition of human finitude and celebrates the exquisite, fragile wonder of life. If we have the privilege of being a member of a community who attends to one who is dying, we attend the bedside not as someone whose identity is qualified as clergy or laity but as members of what Luther described as the priesthood of *all* believers. To be present and accompany one on the journey toward dying is not to hold membership in a hierarchal community but to participate instead in a radical, relational community in a sacred space where one remains ever mindful of one's mortality.







Christ Among the Doctors  
1506  
Albrecht Dürer  
German painter  
(1471–1528)

## Leonard M. Hummel

Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology and Pastoral Counseling

Primarily, a good death would be an occasion when one does not worry too much about whether one is dying a good death; I suggest this perspective because I think a death is good when one is not so much concerned about whether or not one is dying well but whether one is assured that one is well in one's relationship with God. The antithesis of a good death would involve worrying too much that one is not dying a good death. Perhaps a more realistic approach would be to hope for a "good enough death;" I am reminded of how psychologists argue that the goal of being a parent should be to strive to be a good enough parent and to remain cognizant that perfection is not only impossible but should not be desired. As imperfect mortals, we must remember that our efforts at living and dying may at best be adequate.

The current literature in pastoral counseling expresses concerns about the ways in which Americans, in particular, upper-middle class white Americans are dying, and the implications are not constructive or indicative of a good death, especially when one considers

the medical measures that can be taken to prolong one's life, almost to the point of denying the inevitability of death. Certainly there should be some form of pain management, but the dying process should not be extended too long, and one is hopeful that the experience is not prolonged more than desired. It may be desirable, but not always feasible, for family members to be together to experience the approaching of death. The survivors may believe it is important to try to resolve conflicts, although such resolution is not always possible, and again, may not always be desirable. Sharing our perspectives on faith with the dying may prove to be a source of great comfort for family and friends, but the survivors must discern when such a discussion is appropriate.

I am reminded of the story of a pastor who was talking to other ministers with whom he was very friendly and who knew he had a terminal illness. One colleague remarked to the pastor, "In the past you have taught us how to live; now, you will teach us how to die." Whereas the minister may have been theologically astute, he was pastorally incompetent.

We must be careful not to heap the burden on people, in life or death, of becoming models or exemplars of good ways to die or to suggest that they have to engage in a practice that is more arduous or heroic than to which they are accustomed. And for whose benefit? Their benefit or our benefit?

There is a need for us to be cautious that we do not outweigh an ideal of what it means to die well and regard others as dying less than well. I find the conception of a good death slightly misleading because of my concern that it suggests to some that only deaths where one is in some sense nurturing one's soul and waiting for the inevitable are good deaths. I am aware historically there have been people who have lived in dread they may die suddenly and they will not have time to engage in acts of soul preparation; for me, as a Lutheran pastor and as a pastoral counselor, the more serious concern is that there is more emphasis on our "soul making" or our religious disposition than in the grace of God, no matter how one dies.

## John Lachs

The Centennial Professor of Philosophy, Senior Fellow in the Institute for Public Policy Studies

I believe there is a natural life cycle for human beings; this is not an odd or an unusual idea to believe although we tend to forget about the natural cycle, and we tend to forget about it especially when we take seriously any claim of the prognosticators who predict that at the end of this century people will have life spans of over 150 years. I think it would be terrible for us to forget our finitude, and that finitude, to me, means that here is a natural life span, however long, not too long, where you are born, you grow and you are reared, you reach your zenith, and then you decline, and at the end you die. And part of the good death is that death not happen too soon. It is terrible when a young person of 20 dies, or a middle aged person of 40 dies. I think that it is better—much, much better—for one to die at the appropriate time, which is late in life.

But why is it appropriate then? Because I view life as having a teleology, a purpose. There are certain goals we want to accomplish—rearing children, writing books, creating a business—yet there is that purpose that needs time to be accomplished, and the energy that is us needs to be displayed, so the good death is one that is not only late in life because you have lived long enough, but also because by then you have accomplished your purpose and the energy has been exhausted. There is no more desire to accomplish more, and you can shut your eyes and say without any regrets, "I've had a good life, and can have a good death, too."

There are, nonetheless, two other conditions which we must endeavor to create for ensuring a person's good death. We must not allow people to die alone or to die without hope; for the dying to have a sense of hope and community is essential, and we must encourage the dying to understand that the energy within the family or community of friends will continue. Secondly, we must convert our grief into celebration so that we do not grieve over a person who is ready to die. We celebrate one's life, and that celebration is really wonderful for the dying person because one then understands, "You appreciated my life," and for the dying, that must be a wonderful feeling.

## Mark Manassee

Chaplain, Department of Pastoral Care  
Vanderbilt University Medical Center

Understanding the personal and social context of the patient is crucial in answering the question, "What is a good death?"; however, there are some general perspectives of what often makes a good death possible. Of course, this whole discussion assumes one's death does not come rapidly through a traumatic event, which is, unfortunately, often the case.

The saddest situation one encounters in the hospital setting is the patient who is dying alone without the presence of family or friends. I can't imagine anything being lonelier than to face one's final days and hours without the presence of family, friends, and those from one's faith community. Unfortunately, hospitals and other institutions can isolate patients from communities of care and separate people from those they most need. This is one reason why hospice can be such an important part of a good death.

*For all the modern talk about death being a natural part of life and something to be welcomed, it is still for many an event feared and our final enemy.*

Corresponding to this, a good death is one where people are able to be reconciled or at least make attempts at reconciliation with those from whom they are alienated. Maybe the patient is estranged from a family member or hurt feelings have existed over time. Or maybe the reconciliation is between family members other than the patient. Either way, the patient's impending death becomes the occasion of reconciliation and healing. What is a very sad occasion becomes simultaneously a transforming event.

Modern medical technology has brought rich advances in health care. Individuals are able to overcome disease and traumatic injury where death would have formerly been certain. Patients also are able to live with chronic conditions with reduction of pain and increased mobility often adding months or years to their lives. However, modern medical technology also has put patients and families in harrowing situations where agonizing decisions must be made. The decisions to withdraw life support or

discontinue life-saving measures are surely the most painful choices that any family member can make. It can be an almost impossible task for a family member to discern the wishes of the patient, the medical options, and one's personal and family wishes while a patient's life hangs in the balance. For a patient's wishes to be known clearly regarding the extent of medical care desired is an important element of a good death. A living will, advanced directive, and organ donation card can be immensely helpful in this regard.

Finally, the opportunity for a person to reflect upon one's spiritual journey is a crucial element of a good death. As one faces one's own death, questions of eternity, faith, and God become more poignant. A good death surely is one where a person can look back and find a life lived well. If that has not been the case, questions of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation may come to the forefront. For all the modern talk about death being a natural part of life and something to be

welcomed, it is still for many an event feared and our final enemy.

There are many helpful acts the community of faith, friends, and family can do to help facilitate another's impending death. The most important may be simply to be present without giving advice or judging where a person is emotionally. Often, it is too painful for people to be in the presence of someone ill so they withdraw. Unfortunately, this can isolate the patient further from what one most needs.

Additionally, people often want to offer helpful comments but fall into platitudes that may have the opposite effect when often there are no words that can heal at that moment. What may be most appropriate is to ask the person if there are particular physical needs that they can help with or to pray with the person. Faith communities often want those ill to have a heroic faith that is a testimony to others and, therefore, do not make room for faithful expressions of doubt, anger, lament, or grief. To the extent that



those in the faith community are able to create safe spaces for those kinds of expressions, but without demanding them, they, too, provide helpful pastoral care.

There has been in the last few decades an emphasis on stages of dying. People have often looked on this in a hierarchical way in which acceptance was the final and desired stage. Caregivers were often seen as people to help others move along the stages. Thanatologists (people who study the death process) view the grief of one's own impending death in a more cyclical fashion that comes in waves rather than in linear stages. Perhaps the most helpful gesture a caregiver can offer is to respect the wishes of patients, offer a compassionate presence wherever the person is emotionally, and not to forget the needs of people in close relationship to the patient.



*Dipylon Amphora*  
with scene of mourning for deceased laid out on bier (central panel)  
ca. 750 B.C.E.  
Athens: Dipylon Cemetery  
terra cotta  
61" in height  
National Archaeological Museum, Athens



## Viki B. Matson

Director of Field Education

Assistant Professor of the Practice of Ministry

As I contemplate the question "What is a good death?", I am reminded of what Dr. Ira Byock, a former president of the American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine, writes in his book, *Dying Well: The Prospect for Growth at the End of Life*. A good death may occur when we have completed the emotional work of setting our relationships right: asking forgiveness where need be, granting forgiveness where need be, saying "I love you" to those significant people in our lives, and saying good bye. At the end of one's life, we may find ourselves in the posture of having to make difficult, but honest statements, but I believe it is important for one to die with a sense that the emotional work is finished—that condition, which can be simple but ever so complicated, can result in a good death for the individual and for the survivors.

If one makes the claim that the completion of emotional work is what makes a good death, then what about a sudden death in which there was not time? Does this result in less than a good death? A sudden death might not be the ideal death, especially if there were broken relationships that could have been set right had there been time, but I think the antithesis of a good death would be a situation in which there was time, but a person could not have an openness of heart or spirit and became bitter, out of fear—out of a fear that prevents one from taking risks in conversation. Perhaps for that person there never has been a history of talking in this way, so we are ultimately asking for a behavior from one that is out of character.

There are, however, concrete actions that those of us who are the loved ones of a dying person can do in the hope of initiating a conversation. For example, we can ask, "What is in your heart?", "How is this experience for you?", or "What do you need for us to do?" The loved ones can initiate the possibility for conversation. The dying person may be hanging on and hanging on, afraid of the grief that the loved ones will experience, so it is important sometimes for those at the bedside to grant permission for the person to die. But what we must always remember is that the bedside is not the place to stage forced reconciliations.

Family members, friends, and leaders from faith communities need to be discerning enough to know when a dying person needs to have a coming to terms with God or a human.

One of the most powerful events in my ministry occurred when I attended the death bed of a young man during my chaplaincy at Saint Thomas Hospital in Nashville. He had been born into a privileged life as the son of wealthy, religiously fundamentalist parents and had lived in New York during his young adult years. When he developed AIDS, he returned home, to Nashville, to die, but his family insisted on his illness being kept a secret from their friends.

As a chaplain, I discerned that he needed more than the fundamentalist God of his parents' religious sensibility; he needed to die not feeling as if he were being punished or that he was an embarrassment to God and to his family—that he was not an aberration of God's good creation. I took a risk in conversation with him and was able to encourage him to think about God in less restrictive ways. As a provider of pastoral care, I offered him an alternative way of thinking about God, life, and death, and I am convinced he experienced a peace that he never before imagined. He had a good death.

—compiled by Victor Judge

# IMAGES OF

READING *PARADISE LOST* THROUGH THE THEOLOGY OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

BY JAMES P. BYRD JR., PHD'99

Some of the more vivid portrayals of Hell and damnation in the English language come from John Milton and Jonathan Edwards. In the mid-seventeenth century, John Milton described Hell in epic proportions, focusing on the rebellion of Satan and the fall of humanity in *Paradise Lost*. In the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards preached the terrors of Hell in various sermons, including *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, a bestseller that remains a consistent selection in student anthologies of American literature.

Milton and Edwards are surprising in that, despite their Puritan theologies, their descriptions of Hell and Satan are more renowned than their descriptions of Heaven and Christ. The Hell of *Paradise Lost* is a place of drama and angst that features the "heroics" of Milton's Satan, one of the classic figures of Western literature. Similarly, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* was Edwards's best selling sermon in his time and remains his most famous work because his description of Hell is captivating and elicits affective responses from readers. Milton and Edwards, therefore, depict damnation in vivid images that continue to fascinate readers. Why did Satan and Hell warrant such descriptions? I argue that Milton and Edwards believed that sensible descriptions of damnation were necessary in order to defend the justice of God and to awaken sinners to their plight. To defend God's justice

*Satan Going Forth from the Presence of the Lord*  
c. 1821  
by William Blake  
English poet, painter, engraver,  
printer, mystic, and social critic  
(1757–1827)  
ink and color washes  
Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum





in a world of evil and to justify God's righteousness in the creation of Hell, Milton and Edwards not only strove to teach their readers and hearers, they worked to change them, to impress upon them images of Satan and Hell that engage the intellect and move the soul.

### The Poet's Theodicy

Milton developed as a poet and as a Puritan in turbulent times.<sup>1</sup> Educated at Cambridge, Milton took a baccalaureate in 1629 and a master of arts degree in 1632. During these years, Cambridge was a center of Puritan influence, and while Milton was busy earning his M.A., the Puritan migration to New England was underway. The Massachusetts Bay Company, populated by a group of Puritans, many with Cambridge educations, migrated to the New World to escape the anti-Puritan policies of King Charles I and Bishop William Laud, who persecuted Puritans for their unwillingness to comply with the orders and ceremonies of the Church of England. While Milton did not travel to America with the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay, he shared their criticism of the Church and their opposition to Charles and Bishop Laud.

Milton's Puritan convictions had radical political implications, which he revealed in pamphlets that attacked the episcopacy and defended freedom of religion and freedom of the press. Beginning in 1642, the English civil war raged, pitting Parliament, controlled by Puritans, against the forces of Charles I. The remarkable culmination came with the imprisonment of Charles in 1647 and his beheading in 1649, along with Archbishop Laud. Such regicide did not go unheralded by Milton; he defended the execution of the king in his *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649), arguing that a free people were obligated to subdue tyranny. In the midst of these activities, Milton began to lose his sight and became completely blind by 1651; sixteen years later he published the first edition of *Paradise Lost*.

The epic has an appropriately grand purpose—to defend the justice and goodness of God, despite the existence of evil in the world. The philosophical term for this task is “theodicy,” which, as Milton expresses in Book I of *Paradise Lost*, is the attempt “to justify the ways of God to [humanity]” (1.26).<sup>2</sup> In

traditional Augustinian fashion, Milton's response to the problem of evil rests on an interpretation of Genesis 1–3, the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, their disobedience in response to the temptations of Satan in the form of a serpent, and God's punishment for their sin: expulsion from Eden and the introduction of sin, death, and suffering in the world. This narrative, as Milton's readers understood, puts the blame for suffering and evil squarely on the shoulders

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of humanity. God, though infinitely good and infinitely powerful, gave Adam and Eve the freedom to obey or disobey. As Milton's God says,

*I made [Adam] just and right,  
Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall  
(III.99)*

How else, asks Milton's God, would he know if his creatures were sincere in their obedience? If they were not created free, Adam and Eve would have “served necessity” rather than God (III.110). Evil entered the world, therefore, not through God's absolute decree but through humanity's free choice to disobey God's commands.

Before the decisive fall of Adam and Eve brought evil to earth, rebellious angels had fallen from heaven through a similar exercise of free will. The chief of these fallen angels, Satan, assumes a pivotal role in *Paradise Lost*, and his place in the epic has generated controversy for centuries afterward. The problem issues from the attractiveness of Satan in the poem. Milton's Satan is one of the most magnificent literary figures in the English language. But the puzzling question remains: Why would a Puritan poet describe Satan in such an attractive way?

One explanation came from writers in the Romantic period, especially William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Romantics—rebels against authority that they were—admired Milton's rebellious stance against tyranny,

particularly his support for the beheading of King Charles. Similarly, the Romantics admired Milton's Satan, the ultimate rebel against the ultimate authority—the King of Heaven.<sup>4</sup> Shelley argued that “nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan.”<sup>5</sup> To the Romantics, Milton's Satan was a modern rebel-hero against tyranny. Satan believed that God's rule was unjust, so he acted on his principles, rebelling against God, even though Satan knew that the price of his rebellion was the loss of Heaven.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Romantics thought that Milton's God was uninteresting. Romantics concluded, therefore, that, despite his Puritan sensibilities, Milton unconsciously preferred Satan to God. As Blake remarked, Milton “wrote in fetters...when he wrote of Angels and God” and wrote “at liberty when” describing “Devils and Hell...because he was...of the Devil's party without knowing it.”<sup>7</sup>

This interpretation faces opposition from interpreters who argue that Satan cannot be the hero of *Paradise Lost* since the “moral” of the epic is that “disobedience of God is the source of all evil and the content of all error” while “obedience to God brings happiness and the righteous life.”<sup>8</sup> One of the proponents of this view, C. S. Lewis, agreed that Satan is “a magnificent character.” But Satan's magnificence does not imply that Milton admired Satan's cause. Instead, Lewis observed that “the imitation in art of unpleasing objects may be a pleasing imitation.” While we may admire evil characters for aspects of their personalities—their complexity, intelligence, or courage, for instance—our admiration does not imply that we identify with their cause or that, if they were real people, we would like to know them personally.<sup>9</sup> We can find an illustration of this idea by considering one of the most admired villains in contemporary popular culture, Dr. Hannibal Lecter, the psychiatrist turned cannibalistic serial killer in the novels of Thomas Harris and recent films, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Hannibal*, and *Red Dragon*. Prominent film critic Roger Ebert says that “Hannibal Lecter is one of the most wicked villains in movie history, and one of the most beloved.” We admire Dr. Lecter not only because he frequently assists the FBI in tracking down other serial killers, but also because “he is droll and literate, dryly humorous, [and] elegantly mannered.”<sup>10</sup> Does this mean that we would like to know Dr. Lecter in real life, that we would like to

meet with him or even have dinner with him? Probably not. Yet we admire his character despite his evil deeds, and this is the distinction Lewis makes. Milton did not join the “devil's party,” despite the fact that he created an admirable Satan. But the question remains: Why would a Puritan poet create an admirable Satan?

Literary critic Stanley Fish offers a solution, arguing that Milton's attractive presentation of Satan is essential to Milton's purpose of justifying God to humanity. The key to reading *Paradise Lost*, according to Fish, is to examine “the experience” the poem provokes in the reader. He argues that “*Paradise Lost* is a poem about how its readers came to be the way they are; its method, ‘not so much a teaching as an intangling,’ [sic] is to provoke in its readers wayward, fallen responses which are then corrected by one of several authoritative voices,” including “the narrator, God,” and angels in the poem.<sup>11</sup> Milton produced an admirable Satan in hopes that the reader would appreciate Satan's point of view and identify with his plight. Milton's purpose requires that the reader experience the temptation that Adam and Eve experienced, which means that the reader needs to understand the attractiveness of the disobedience that brought sin into the world. Christian readers of Milton's poem do not expect an attractive and persuasive Satan. But only this kind of character can demonstrate the potency of temptation and the power of evil. While admiring Satan, the reader is abruptly reminded that this admirable character, this

**WHILE ADMIRING SATAN, THE READER IS ABRUPTLY REMINDED THAT THIS ADMIRABLE CHARACTER, THIS SUBLIME SATAN, IS ALSO THE PERSONIFICATION OF EVIL.**

sublime Satan, is also the personification of evil. Through this constant back-and-forth between admiring Satan and being repulsed by him, the reader experiences the temptation and fall and appreciates the justice of God in condemning evil. This process, according to Fish, brings readers “to a better understanding of [their] sinful nature and” encourages them “to participate in [their] own reformation.”<sup>12</sup>

Readers meet Satan at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*; he is the first character to speak. After leading a rebellion against God, Satan

and his angelic accomplices are cast into Hell, and in the first scene, Satan, Beelzebub, and the other fallen angels are lying on a lake of fire, still unconscious from the fall. When they awake, Satan is defiant and unrepentant, asserting that:

*All is not lost; the unconquerable Will,  
And study of revenge, immortal hate,  
And courage never to submit or yield:  
And what is else not to be overcome?  
That Glory never shall [God's] wrath or might  
Extort from me. To bow and sue for grace  
With suppliant knee, and deify his power,...  
We may with more successful hope resolve  
To wage by force or guile eternal War  
Irreconcilable, to our grand Foe,  
Who now triumphs, and in th' excess of joy  
Sole reigning holds the Tyranny of Heav'n.  
(I.106–124)*

Thus, despite humiliation and defeat, Satan vows that he was wronged, that his cause was just, that he rebelled against the “Tyranny of Heaven.” Satan asserts that he will never submit himself to God's rule again. To the contrary, Satan's strategy remains that of war, though perhaps he will not attack heaven as much “by force” as by “guile,” since overt confrontation was disastrous in the first attempt. Either way, Satan's war against Heaven is “eternal.”

Satan, therefore, enters the stage with a courageous speech. He fumes against God's injustice and tyranny, and defends the justice of his cause against the almighty oppressor. Our first impression of Satan is, as one critic describes, the picture of “fortitude in adversity, enormous endurance, a certain splendid recklessness, remarkable powers of rising to an occasion, extraordinary qualities of leadership.”<sup>13</sup> But this powerful, courageous speech, which gives us an attractive impression of Satan, leads to an abrupt challenge

from the narrator, reminding us that Satan is not what he seems:

*So spake th' Apostate Angel, though in pain,  
Vaunting aloud, but rackt with deep  
despair (I.125–6).*

Thus, despite Satan's rhetoric of defiance and continued war with Heaven, the narrator reminds us that this mighty being has fallen miserably and is currently lying on a lake of fire. As Fish observes, “there is a disparity between our response to the speech and the [narrator's] evaluation of it”; specifically, “the comment of the [narrator] unsettles the reader, who sees in it at least a partial challenge to his [or her] own assessment of the speech.”<sup>14</sup>

Even while suffering on a fiery lake, Satan argues, convincingly, that Hell is a new kingdom to be conquered, not a place of infinite suffering. While the fallen angels have exchanged heavenly “celestial light” for a Hellish “mournful gloom,” the advantage is that the ruler of Hell can dictate justice, decreeing right and wrong apart from God's designs:

*farthest from [God] is best  
Whom reason hath equaled, force hath made  
supreme  
Above his equals. Farewell happy Fields  
Where Joy forever dwells: Hail horrors, hail  
Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell  
Receive thy new Possessor: One who brings  
A mind not to be chang'd by Place or Time.  
The mind is its own place, and in it self  
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of  
Heav'n (I.247–55).*

Hell, like Heaven, is a state of mind, Satan asserts. And he has a new challenge and a new kingdom to rule, unencumbered by God's tyrannical interference. Satan claims equality with God, arguing that God defeated him because of superior power, not superior intellect or character. And Satan believes that, aided by his mighty intellect and governance, he can make a new Heaven out of Hell. Rather than a place of damnation, therefore, Hell is a place of freedom—autonomy from God's tyrannical interference:



*Warring Angels*  
 (a Miltonic subject interpreted as Michael  
 with a sword attacking Satan)  
 c. 1796  
 William Blake  
 British Museum  
 Department of Prints and Drawings



Here at least  
 We shall be free; ...  
 Here we may reign secure, and in my choice  
 To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:  
 Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n  
 (I.258–63).

So Satan asserts freedom and autonomy in Hell and vows that his kingdom will not take on the tyrannical policies of God's rule in Heaven. Instead, Satan consults his fallen colleagues in governing his kingdom, calling a meeting at "Pandemonium," a term that Milton coined to describe "the high Capital/Of Satan and his Peers" (I.756). Contrary to the connotation of "confusion" that Pandemonium acquires later in the poem and retains today, this first meeting of devils is quite organized. And, given Milton's Puritan loathing of Catholicism, we should not be surprised that his description of Pandemonium closely resembles the Vatican.<sup>15</sup> Pandemonium becomes the scene of an active debate of possible responses to God, including a suicidal outright attack against heaven offered by a devil named Moloch, a passive "do-nothing" policy of self-protection offered by Belial, and an accommodating suggestion that they satisfy themselves with Hell and forget Heaven, the idea introduced by Mammon.<sup>16</sup> Yet Satan's strategy is the preferred one—an "easier enterprise" (II.345) whereby they could gain revenge on God, not by suicidal attack on heaven, but by causing the downfall of God's fondest new creation, humanity. The devils decide to pursue Adam and Eve, the "puny habitants" of Eden, and the plan is to:

Seduce them to our Party, that their God  
 May prove their foe, and with repenting hand  
 Abolish his own works. This would surpass  
 Common revenge, and interrupt his joy  
 (II.368–71).

The devils adopt this plan by vote. Even in their devilish plans, therefore, we gain the impression that Hell's government is superior to that of Heaven because Hell is ruled by representative judgment of a council, not by tyrannical decree. Yet once again the narrator corrects Satan's claims, pointing out earlier

that Satan could do nothing—could not even raise his head—without "the will/ And high permission of all-ruling Heaven" (I.211–12). God rules all—even Hell—despite the devils' delusion that they govern themselves.

Readers of *Paradise Lost*, therefore, must be on guard, constantly aware that Satan's fantastic appearance and marvelous speeches are deceitful. The stakes are high for readers, because, as Fish observes, "if the [readers lose themselves] in the workings of [Satan's] speech even for a moment, [they place] themselves in a compromising position." The attraction of Satan is a distraction, causing readers to lose sight of "the glory of God, and the state of" their souls. Readers are "at least in danger" because "sin is a matter of degrees. To think 'how fine this all sounds, even though it is Satan's' is to be but a few steps from thinking 'how fine this all sounds'—and no conscious qualification." Accordingly, "from a disinterested appreciation of technique one moves easily to a grudging admiration for the technician and then to a guarded sympathy and finally, perhaps, to assent."<sup>17</sup>

Milton's purpose in presenting an attractive Satan, therefore, was to seduce readers into believing Satan's lies—much as Adam and Eve did—and then to reveal the deception,

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chastising readers for joining Adam and Eve in succumbing to temptation. When Satan speaks, readers "fail to read Satan's speech with the critical acumen it demands."<sup>18</sup> And, as Milton and every Puritan knew, a sense of security in one's perceptions or in one's personal righteousness was dangerous. Instead, Puritans believed they should recognize that they were fallen and that they could not depend on their own intellect alone to reveal the truth to them. Also Puritans recognized that they should retain some anxiety about their salvation, always striving to learn more

of God and their eternal state, but never believing they had the full picture in view. Consequently, Milton's epic proves an essential lesson to its readers "by first 'intangling' [sic] us in the folds of Satan's rhetoric, and then 'informing us better' in 'due season.'" In so doing, "Milton forces us to acknowledge the *personal relevance* of the Arch-Fiend's existence; and, in the process, he validates dramatically" the readers' inability to perceive reality apart from God's revealing vision. As Fish argues, "the wariness these encounters with demonic attraction make us feel is part of a larger pattern in which we are taught the hardest of all lessons, distrust of our own abilities and perceptions."<sup>19</sup> Milton tempts readers with an attractive Satan, but this is a "good temptation," which proves to readers that they are vulnerable, that their senses are imperfect, and that they should not have confidence in their own efforts, abilities, and perceptions. "The temptation is good because by means of it the secret corruption within is exposed, and consequently we are better able to resist the blandishments of less benevolent tempters."<sup>20</sup>

The theodicy of Milton, therefore, required that his readers experience the attractive temptation to evil—the same attractive temptation that caused the fall. Christian readers knew well the fall narrative of Genesis, and they understood the Augustinian explanation for evil's entrance into the world through the fall. But intellectual knowledge alone was insufficient. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton seduced readers to experience the fall personally, to interact with Satan's wiles, to engage in an experiential understanding of evil's persuasive powers. This move from an *intellectual apprehension* of Satan's evil to a *sensible experience* of it was essential to Milton's purpose of communicating God's justice to the reader. Through Satan, Milton demonstrates to readers the "evidence of [their] corruption," their own sin, and prompts them to seek personal reform. The task that Milton undertook was "to educate [readers] to an awareness of [their] position and responsibilities as ...fallen" creatures. In order to do this, Milton strove "to recreate in the mind of the reader ...the drama of the Fall, to make him [or her] fall again exactly as Adam did."<sup>21</sup>

#### An Experiential Sense of Damnation

Most people who have heard of Jonathan

Edwards think of him as a preacher of Hellfire sermons. This impression of Edwards frustrates scholars who have studied him more closely. In his influential biography of Edwards, Perry Miller claims that Edwards's thought bridged two world views—the pre-modern, theological perspective of the Reformed tradition as represented by New England Puritans and the perspective of an enlightened age, which dawned during his lifetime. Miller says that while Edwards "speaks from a primitive religious conception ... yet at the same time he speaks from an insight into science and psychology so much ahead of his time that our own can hardly be said to have caught up with him."<sup>22</sup> Edwards's theology of Hell represents the former, primitive side of his thought, in Miller's view. Particularly egregious to Edwards scholars is the fact that his Hellfire sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, remains the most printed and most recognized of Edwards's works.

Scholars of Edwards complain *Sinners* represents only a small area of Edwards's

intellectual landscape, for his thought spanned a full range of theological, ethical, scientific, psychological, and aesthetic topics.<sup>23</sup> Edwards, a Yale-educated minister and heir of the Puritan theological tradition, secured his reputation as a preacher, theologian, and defender of the Great Awakening revivals during his twenty-one years as pastor of the Congregationalist Church in Northampton, Massachusetts. After leaving his Northampton pulpit under unhappy circumstances in 1750, Edwards worked as a missionary to Native Americans in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, while composing the influential theological treatises *Freedom of the Will* (1754) and *Original Sin* (1758). Edwards also wrote important works in theological ethics, including *The End for Which God Created the World* and *The Nature of True Virtue* (1765).

Despite the breadth of Edwards's intellect, *Sinners* was his most popular work, in his own time as in ours.<sup>24</sup> Why? I argue that this sermon's popularity is similar to the continued admiration for Milton's Satan. Like Milton's Satan, Edwards's Hell resonates with listeners

and readers because of the vivid way in which God's damnation is illustrated and justified. Both Milton and Edwards use images of damnation to justify God's ways to humanity. And the task for both Milton and Edwards required the use of graphic imagery that provoked the experience of their intended audiences because more than an intellectual reaction was essential to the purposes of both Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Edwards's *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Like Milton's depiction of Satan, Edwards believed that his preaching of Hell needed to rouse experiences in his readers. Hell was not only a necessary doctrine that his congregants needed to understand; it was a reality they needed to feel and taste, a vital threat of which they needed to be aware. The proper response to the doctrine of Hell was not only understanding, but terror, and Edwards strove to stimulate this experience through his sermons.

Edwards's defense of Hell is all the more fervent because the doctrine of damnation was under attack from leading "enlight-



ened” thinkers in the eighteenth century. These representatives of the Age of Reason believed that Hell was an undesirable remnant from an arcane theological age, an idea that reasonable people could never accept. Who could believe, these thinkers asked, that a just and benevolent God would condemn souls to Hellfire for eternity? These thinkers offered alternative, more reasonable and humane visions of the afterlife such as the idea that God eventually saved everyone (John Tillotson) and the concept of annihilation, which taught that damned souls were obliterated, not damned to suffer eternally (John Locke).<sup>25</sup>

Edwards argued that “freethinkers” doubts of Hell resulted from an unwillingness to take seriously humanity’s sin against God. Sin, Edwards argued, even the most minute infraction of God’s law, was of great offense to God, who was infinitely holy and deserved perfect “love, honor, and obedience.” An offense against an infinite being was an infinite offense that required infinite punishment. Hell, therefore, was both a rational and a justified response to humanity’s sin. To dismiss Hell was to make light of sin, and thus to dishonor God, his dignity, and his righteous laws. To take Hell out of the universe would be to take out justice. If God were to let sin go unpunished, God would cease to be both righteous and just. A righteous God could not look upon evil; a just God could not let evil go unpunished.<sup>26</sup>

But it was not enough for Edwards to defend the rationality of Hell against freethinkers. An intellectual understanding of Hell was essential, but it was fruitless without a sensible understanding of Hell’s reality and justice. Edwards preached on damnation to awaken his congregants to just such an experiential sense of Hell. In his *Divine and Supernatural Light*, Edwards describes the difference between an intellectual knowledge of divine truths, which included Hell since it was a divine creation, and a spiritual understanding, which involved not only the mind, but also the entire person, including the affections, inclinations, emotions, and will. Edwards contends that:

[T]o see the beauty and loveliness of spiritual things ...is not a speculative thing, but

*depends on the sense of the heart... the perceiving of spiritual beauty and excellency no more belongs to reason, than it belongs to the sense of feeling to perceive colors, or the power of seeing to perceive the sweetness of food... Reason’s work is to perceive truth and not excellency... [I]t is no more reason that immediately perceives it, than it is reason that perceives the sweetness of honey: it depends on the sense of the heart.<sup>27</sup>*

In Edwards’s view, spiritual or saving knowledge of divine truths was not mere intellectual assent. Christians not only needed to understand God’s love and truth intellectually; they needed to know it in their hearts; they needed to have a sensible understanding of God’s justice and love, a “relish” or “taste” of divine ideas. Hell is one such divine truth that needed not only to be understood intellectually, but to be known sensibly as personally real, threatening, and just.

In his classic description of revivals, *Faithful Narrative*, Edwards argues that a sensible knowledge of Hell’s justice is essential to salvation and that one of the surest signs of

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awakened, truly converted persons is their sense that God is just in damning them to Hell, despite their religious acts:

*[T]o those in whom awakenings seem to have a saving issue, commonly the first thing that appears ... is a conviction of the justice of God in their condemnation, appearing in a sense of their own exceeding sinfulness, and the vileness of all their performances.... Some have declared ... that God may glorify Himself in their damnation, and they wonder that God has suffered them to live so long, and has not cast them into Hell long ago.<sup>28</sup>*

*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* provokes images through which Edwards endeavored to bring his hearers to such a sensible encounter with Hell. Edwards’s text for the sermon is Deuteronomy 32:35: “Their foot shall slide in due time,” and he focuses upon the “slippery” effect, emphasizing that sinners tread on slippery ground and that they are precariously close to falling into Hell at any moment. Edwards warns sinners “that the reason why they are not fallen already, and do not fall now, is only that God’s appointed time is not come.” Further, “[t]here 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.”<sup>29</sup>

And, despite enlightened thinkers who claimed that God’s justice would not permit anyone to be cast into Hell, Edwards argues the contrary:

*[sinners] deserve to be cast into Hell; so that divine justice never stands in the way, ... Yea, on the contrary, justice calls aloud for an infinite punishment of their sins...*

*The sword of divine justice is every moment brandished over their heads, and it is nothing but the hand of arbitrary mercy, and God’s mere will, that holds it back.<sup>30</sup>*

Edwards follows this statement of God’s justice in condemning sinners to Hell with graphic descriptions of damnation:

*The wrath of God burns against [sinners]...; 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 whet, and held over them, and the pit hath opened its mouth under them....The devil stands ready to fall upon them, and seize them as his own, at what moment God shall permit him. ...The devils watch them... they stand waiting for them, like greedy hungry lions that see*

*their prey, and expect to have it, .... 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 lost.<sup>31</sup>*

The major errors of sinners concerning their impending damnation are procrastination and unfounded security. Edwards attempts to remove any vestiges of security in his congregation by warning them that life’s span is uncertain; Hell is not a future reality in the distance, it is a present threat, an active terror:

*The arrows of death fly unseen at noon-day; 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.... Almost every natural man that hears of Hell, flatters himself that he shall escape it; he depends upon himself for his own security; .... They hear indeed that there are but few saved, and that the greater part of men that have died heretofore are gone to Hell; but each one imagines that he lays out matters better for his own escape than others have done.<sup>32</sup>*

In theory, the people knew that the odds were not in their favor—most were not elect, so most would spend eternity in Hell. The crucial problem for Edwards was that his congregants knew the threat of the “lake of burning brimstone,” but they were “not sensible of this.”<sup>33</sup> The Hellish threat was not a compelling reality for most, for the majority of people did not expect that they were doomed to Hell. Edwards opposes this false sense of security with his personal, sensible images. As Milton wants his readers to experience the power of sin, Edwards wants his hearers to “feel” Hell, to experience its threat in the sermon because the lack of sensibility to Hell is a critical issue for salvation. Edwards, therefore, addresses his congregation personally with his sensible images of terror:



*Satan with a Sword*  
“Going to & fro in the Earth & walking up & down in it”  
c. 1823  
William Blake  
Sir Geoffrey Keynes Collection

*ferred to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into Hell since you arose in the morning, but that God’s hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to Hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into Hell.<sup>35</sup>*

Edwards also includes children in his warnings of Hellfire:

*And you, children, who are unconverted, do not you know that you are going down to Hell, to bear the dreadful wrath of that God, who is now angry with you every day and every night? Will you be content to be the children of the devil... ?<sup>36</sup>*

**Absolving God**

The editors of a recent edition of Edward’s works refer to Edwards as “an American Milton, whose medium was theology as surely as blank verse was Milton’s” and that, “like Milton, Edwards sought a renewal in English-speaking religion that would do justice to the Reformation.”<sup>37</sup> This ambitious task included a defense of God’s justice, despite the evil and strife that plagued even those Christians who attempted to obey God’s biblical commands in cleansing the Church of popish errors and purging the state of tyrannical rule. Milton’s attractive Satan and Edwards’s vivid descriptions of Hell were essential components in justifying God’s ways to humanity. The goals in both cases were to awaken readers and hearers to their sin and to absolve God of bringing sin into the world.

Milton and Edwards recognized that mere intellectual appeals would not suffice. Milton realized that his readers knew the fall narrative from Genesis, just as Edwards realized that his congregants believed in election and understood that most people would suf-

*The bow of God’s wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains 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 made drunk with your blood.<sup>34</sup>*

*The God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, 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; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. ...it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to Hell the last night; that you was suf-*



fer in Hell. The task for both the poet and the preacher, therefore, was not to change minds but to transform souls—not only to make readers and hearers think differently but to transform them into different people. Milton and Edwards worked within a Reformed understanding of the psyche in which it was essential for Christians to stay on guard, constantly aware of sin’s prevalence and their own inadequacies. To be confident in one’s salvation was to risk damnation. And the more one heard of sin’s power and human depravity, the more dull such doctrines became. As Stanley Fish notes, eventually the constant “repetition of truth lessens its immediate and personal force, and the sinner becomes complacent in a verbal and abstract contrition. *Paradise Lost* is immediate and forceful in the communication of these unflattering truths.”<sup>38</sup> Edwards’s purpose in describing Hell in his sermons is similar. He uses vivid images of Hell for his hearers because they need to experience Hell personally; to taste and feel is a violent threat to their complacency. Both Milton and Edward worked to convict their audiences of their own culpability in an attempt to move them from complacent self-confidence to an affective engagement with their own sin, the threat of damnation, and the justice of God.

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<sup>1</sup> This brief introduction to Milton is based on “Milton, John,” in Margaret Drabble and Paul Harvey, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford

University Press, 1985): 652–54. Among the many biographies of Milton, the classic remains David Masson, *The life of John Milton: Narrated in Connection with the Political, Ecclesiastical, and Literary History of his Time*, 7 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1859).

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Danielson, “The Fall and Milton’s Theodicy,” in Dennis Danielson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Milton* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 144.

<sup>3</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost: A Poem in Twelve Books*, Second ed. (London: S. Simmons, 1674). Citations are noted by book number followed by line number; thus, Book III, line 99 is denoted as III.99.

<sup>4</sup> Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *A Reader’s Guide to John Milton*, 1st Syracuse University Press ed. (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 186.

<sup>5</sup> Quotations from Stanley Eugene Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1997), ix-x.

<sup>6</sup> James G. Nelson, *The Sublime Puritan: Milton and the Victorians* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1974), 66–67. Blake’s quotation is from *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

<sup>7</sup> See Nelson, *Sublime*, 66–67.

<sup>8</sup> Fish, *Surprised*, ix. This book first published in 1967 and reprinted with an updated preface in 1997.

<sup>9</sup> C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 94.

<sup>10</sup> Roger Ebert, review of *Red Dragon*, in *Chicago Sun Times*, 4 October 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Fish, *Surprised*, x.

<sup>12</sup> Fish, *Surprised*, x.

<sup>13</sup> A.J.A. Waldock quoted in Fish, *Surprised*, 4–5.

<sup>14</sup> Fish, *Surprised*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Nicolson, *Reader’s Guide*, 197–200.

<sup>16</sup> See PL, Book II. For commentary, see Lewis, *Preface*, 104–6.

<sup>17</sup> Fish, *Surprised*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Fish, *Surprised*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Fish, *Surprised*, 22; emphasis added.

<sup>20</sup> Fish, *Surprised*, 41.

<sup>21</sup> Fish, *Surprised*, xiii, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), xxxii.

<sup>23</sup> “Editor’s Introduction,” in Jonathan Edwards et al., *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), viii.

<sup>24</sup> Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought and its British Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 200.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Perry Miller and Harry S. Stout (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957-): 14:29. Edwards opposed “freethinkers” who argued that “God would not go to torment a poor creature to such a dreadful degree.” Edwards, “The Torments of Hell are Exceedingly Great,” in Works, 14:303.

<sup>26</sup> See Fiering, *Moral Thought*, 220; Edwards, Works 4:278-9.

<sup>27</sup> Edwards, *Divine and Supernatural Light*, in Edwards, *Reader*, 121-22.

<sup>28</sup> Edwards, *Faithful Narrative*, *Reader* 73-4., emphasis added.

<sup>29</sup> Edwards, *Sinners*, in *Reader*, 89-90.

<sup>30</sup> Edwards, *Sinners*, in *Reader*, 91.

<sup>31</sup> Edwards, *Sinners*, in *Reader*, 91-92.

<sup>32</sup> Edwards, *Sinners*, in *Reader*, 93-94.

<sup>33</sup> Edwards, *Sinners*, in *Reader*, 95.

<sup>34</sup> Edwards, *Sinners*, in *Reader*, 97.

<sup>35</sup> Edwards, *Sinners*, in *Reader*, 97-98.

<sup>36</sup> Edwards, *Sinners*, in *Reader*, 104.

<sup>37</sup> Edwards, *Reader*, vii.

<sup>38</sup> Fish, *Surprised*, 45.