

Surprised by God's Judgment

by Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

"The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness hath surprised the hypocrites. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?"—Isaiah 33:14.

There are two kinds of persons among God's professing people: the one, those who are truly godly, spoken of in the verse following the text, "He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly" (Isa 33:15a). The other kind consists of "sinners in Zion" or hypocrites. It is to be observed that the Prophet in this chapter speaks interchangeably, first to the one and then to the other of these characters of men, awfully threatening and denouncing the wrath of God against the one and comforting the other with gracious promises.

It may be inquired, "Who are the sinners in Zion?" I answer, "They are those who are in a natural condition among the visible people of God." Zion, or the city of David of old, was a type of the church; and the church of God in Scripture is perhaps more frequently called by the name of Zion than by any other name. And commonly by Zion is meant the true church of Christ, or the invisible church of true saints. But sometimes by this name is meant the visible church, consisting of those who are outwardly, by profession and external privileges, the people of God. This is intended by Zion in this text.

The greater part of the world are sinners: Christ's flock is and ever hath been but a little flock. And the sinners of the world are of two sorts: those who are visibly of Satan's kingdom, who are without the pale of the visible church; and those who do not profess the true religion nor attend the external ordinances of it. Beside these there are the sinners in Zion. Both are the objects of the displeasure and wrath of God; but His wrath is more especially manifested in Scripture against the latter. Sinners in Zion will have by far the lowest place in hell. They are exalted nearest to heaven in this world, and they will be lowest in hell in another. The same is meant by hypocrites. Sinners in Zion are all hypocrites, for they make a profession of the true religion. They attend God's ordinances and make a show of being the worshippers of God; but all is hypocrisy.

They will hereafter be afraid: now many of them seem to have little or no fear. They are quiet and secure. Nothing will awaken them: the most awful threatenings and the loudest warnings do not much move them. They are not so much moved with them, but they can eat, and drink, and sleep, and go about their worldly concerns without much disturbance.... Though now preaching will not awaken them, and the death of others will not make them afraid; though seeing others awakened and converted will not much affect them...yet the time will come, when they will be awakened and fear will take hold of them.

They will be surprised with fear: this seems to imply two things, viz., the greatness of their fear and the suddenness of it.

1. The greatness of their fear: surprise argues a high degree of fear. Their fears will be to the degree of astonishment. Some of the sinners in Zion are somewhat afraid now: they now and then have some degree of fear. They are not indeed convinced that there is such a place as hell; but they are afraid there is....They have at certain times inward molestations from their consciences, but they have no such degrees of fear as to put them upon thorough endeavors to escape future wrath.

However, hereafter they will have fear enough—as much, and a great deal more than they will be able to stand under....terrors will take hold on them as waters. Thus, we read of their fear coming as desolation and of distress and anguish coming upon them (Pro 1:27). It is also very emphatically said of the wicked that trouble and anguish shall prevail against him as a king ready to the battle (Job 15:24).

The stoutest heart of them all will then melt with fear. The hearts of those who are of a sturdy spirit, and perhaps scorn to own themselves afraid of any man, and are even ashamed to own themselves afraid of the wrath of God, will then become as weak as water, as weak as the heart of a little child. And the most reserved of them will not be able to hide his fears. Their faces will turn pale; they will appear with amazement in their countenances; every joint in them will tremble; all their bones will shake; and their knees will smite one against another. Nor will they be able to refrain from crying out with fear and from rending the air with the most dismal shrieks.

2. They will be suddenly seized with fear: the sinners in Zion often remain secure, until they are surprised as with a cry at midnight. They will be, as it were, awakened out of their secure sleep in a dismal fright. They will see an unexpected calamity coming upon them, far more dreadful than they were aware of and coming at an unexpected season.

With respect to the time when the wicked shall be thus surprised with fear: it is often so on a deathbed. Many things pass in their lifetime, which one would think might well strike terror into their souls; as when they see others die, who are as young as they, and of like condition and circumstances with themselves, whereby they may see how uncertain their lives are and how unsafe their souls. It may well surprise many sinners to consider how old they are grown and are yet in a Christless state, how much of their opportunity to get an interest in Christ is irrecoverably gone and how little remains...

But when death comes, then the sinner is often filled with astonishment. It may be, when he is first taken sick, he has great hope that he shall recover; as men are ready to flatter themselves with hopes that things will be as they fain would have them. But when the distemper comes to prevail much upon him, and he sees that he is going into eternity; when he sees that all the medicines of physicians are in vain, that all the care and endeavors of friends are to no purpose, that nothing seems to help him, that his strength is gone, that his friends weep over him and look upon his case as desperate; when he sees by the countenance and behavior of the physician, that he looks upon his case as past hope, and perhaps overhears a whispering in the room, wherein his friends signify one to another, that they look upon it that he is struck with death, or wherein they tell one another that his extreme parts grow cold, that his countenance and manner of breathing and his pulse show death, and that he begins to be in a

cold death-sweat; and when perhaps by and by some one thinks himself bound in duty and faithfulness to let him know the worst, and therefore comes and asks him whether or no he be sensible that he is dying—then how doth fearfulness surprise the sinner in Zion! How doth his heart melt with fear!

At the same time, he cried to God to spare him and made promises how he would live, if God would spare him. And he hoped that God would hear him. He observed also that his friends and perhaps the minister seemed to pray earnestly for him; and he could not but hope that those prayers would be answered, and he should be restored. But now how doth his heart sink and die within him! How doth he look about with a frightened countenance! ...How doth everything look to him when he sees pale, grim death staring him in the face and a vast eternity within a few hours or minutes of him... like a poor drowning man, he catches at slender and brittle twigs and clinches his hands about whatever he sees within his reach. But as death creeps more and more on him, he sees his twigs break, all his hopes of life fail, and he sees he must die. O! There is nothing but death before him! He hath been hoping, but his hopes are all dashed. He sees this world and all that belongs to it are gone. Now come the thoughts of hell into his mind with amazement. O! How shall he go out of the world? He knows he hath no interest in Christ. His sins stare him in the face. O the dreadful gulf of eternity! He had been crying to God, perhaps since he was sick, to save him. And he had some hope, if it were his last sickness, that yet God would pity him and give him pardoning grace before he should die. He begged and pleaded, and he hoped that God would have pity on his poor soul. At the same time he asked others to pray for him, and he had been looking day after day for some light to shine into his soul. But, alas! Now he is dying, and his friends ask him, how death appears to him. Whether any light appears? Whether God has not given him some token of His favor? And he answers, "No," with a poor, faltering, trembling voice, if able to speak at all.

Now death comes on him more and more, and he is just on the brink of eternity. Who can express the fear, the misgivings, the hangings back, and the horrible fright and amazement of his soul? Some who in such circumstances have been able to speak, have been known to err out, "O eternity! eternity!" and some, "O! A thousand worlds for an inch of time!" O! If they might but live a little while longer! But it must not be; go they must. They feel the frame of nature dissolving and perceive the soul is just going; for sometimes the exercise of reason seems to hold to the last.

What in such a case is felt in the soul in those last moments, when it is just breaking its bands with the body, about to fetch its leap on the edge of eternity and the very brink of hell without any Savior or the least testimony of divine mercy—I say, what is sometimes felt by Christless souls in these moments, none can tell nor is it within the compass of our conception.

The misery of the departed soul of a sinner, besides what it now feels, consists in a great part in amazing fears of what is yet to come. When the union of the soul and body is actually broken, and the body has fetched its last gasp, the soul forsakes its old habitation and then falls into the hands of devils, who fly upon it and seize it more violently than ever hungry lions flew upon their prey. And with what horror will it fall into those cruel hands!

And when the soul is carried to hell, and there is tormented, suffers the wrath of the Almighty, and is overwhelmed and crushed with it, it will also be amazed with the apprehensions of what shall yet remain. To think of an eternity of this torment remaining, O how will it fill, and overbear, and sink down the wretched soul! How will the thought of the duration of this torment without end cause the heart to melt like wax! How will the thought of it sink the soul into the bottomless pit of darkness and gloominess! Even those proud and sturdy spirits, the devils, tremble at the thoughts of that greater torment which they are to suffer at the Day of Judgment. So will the poor damned souls of men. They have already more than they will be able to bear: how then will they tremble at the thought of having their misery so vastly augmented.

Persons sometimes in this world are afraid of the Day of Judgment....O how then do the poor souls in hell fear it, who know so much more about it, who know by what they feel already and know certainly that whenever it comes they shall stand on the left hand of the Judge to receive the dreadful sentence...then, in soul and body, they must enter into those everlasting burnings which are prepared for the devil and his angels, and who probably know that their misery is to be an hundred-fold greater than it is now.

Fearfulness will surprise them at the last Judgment. When Christ shall appear in the clouds of heaven, and the last trumpet shall sound, then will the hearts of wicked men be surprised with fearfulness. The poor damned soul in expectation of it trembles every day and every hour from the time of its departure from the body. It knows not, indeed, when it is to be; but it knows it is to be. But when the alarm is given in hell that the day is come, it will be a dreadful alarm indeed. It will, as it were, fill the caverns of hell with shrieks; and when the souls of the damned shall enter into their bodies, it will be with amazing horror of what is coming! And when they shall lift up their heads out of their graves and shall see the Judge, it will be a most terrible sight. Gladly would they return into their graves and hide themselves there if that might be; and gladly would they return into hell, their former state of misery, to hide themselves from this awful sight, if that would excuse them.

So those sinners in Zion, who shall then be found alive on the earth, when they shall see this sight, will be surprised with fearfulness. The fear and horror, which many poor sinners feel when they are dying, is great and beyond all that of which we can have any idea. But that is nothing to the horror that will seize them when they shall come to see this sight.

There will not be a wicked man upon earth who will be able to bear it, let him be who he will. Let him be rich or poor, old or young, male or female, servant or master, king or subject, learned or unlearned; let him be ever so proud, ever so courageous, and ever so sturdy. There is not one who will be able at all to support himself. When he shall see this sight, it will immediately sink his spirit; it will loose the joints of his loins [and] make his countenance more ghastly than death. The rich captains, valiant generals, and princes, who now scorn to show any fear at the face of an enemy, who scorn to tremble at the roaring of cannon, will tremble and shriek when they hear the last trumpet and see the majesty of their Judge. It will make their teeth to chatter and make them fly to hide themselves in the caves and rocks of

mountains, crying to the rocks and mountains to fall on them and cover them from the wrath of the Judge.

Fearfulness will surprise them when they shall be dragged before the judgment-seat. The wicked hang back when they are about to meet death; but in no measure as they will hang back when they come to meet their great Judge. And when they come to stand before the Judge and are put on His left hand, fearfulness and amazement will surprise them. The majesty of the Judge will be intolerable to them. His pure and holy eye, which will behold and search them and pierce them through, will be more terrible to their souls a thousand times than flashes of lightning piercing their hearts. There will they stand in a trembling expectation that by and by they shall hear the words of that dreadful sentence proceed out of the mouth of Christ: they will have a horrible expectation of that sentence. And what shall they do, whither shall they fly, so as to be out of its hearing? They cannot shut their ears so as not to hear it.

Fearfulness will surprise them when the sentence shall come to be pronounced. At the close of the Judgment, that dreadful doom will be uttered by the Judge. And it will be the most terrible voice that ever was heard.

Lastly, fearfulness will surprise them, when they shall come to see the fire kindle upon the world, in which they are to be tormented forever. When the sentence shall have been pronounced, Christ with His blessed saints and glorious angels will leave this lower world and ascend into heaven. Then will the flames begin to kindle, and fire will probably be seen coming down from heaven. And soon will the fire lay hold of that accursed multitude. Then will their hearts be surprised with fearfulness; that fire will appear a dreadful fire indeed....What shall they do, whither shall they go, to avoid those flames? Where shall they hide themselves? If they creep into holes, or creep into caves of the earth, yea if they could creep down to the center of the earth, it will be in vain; for it will set on fire the bottoms of the mountains and burn the lowest hell. They will see no place to fly to, no place to hide themselves....Then their hearts will be filled with fearfulness and will utterly sink in despair. Thus, it shall hereafter be with every one that shall then be found to be a sinner, and especially with sinners in Zion.

Archived by Robert L. Cobb

-Administrator, News For Christians Dot Com

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