

September 5, 2010 by Steve Brandon



If We Go On Sinning Willfully

Hebrews 10:26-31

1. Judgment will be certain (verses 26-27)
2. Judgment will be merciless (verses 28-29)
3. Judgment will be fearful (verses 30-31)

In the 1730's a movement of the Spirit of God swept across the America. Many, many people heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and were converted. Many people repented of their sins and believed upon the Lord Jesus Christ. It wasn't technique. It wasn't some new innovation. Rather, it was the Holy Spirit moving in many people all throughout colonial America. So great was the effect that this movement has been called, "The Great Awakening." However, not all of the churches in America experienced the great blessing of God in their midst. In particular, there was a church in Enfield, Connecticut, which remained cold and lifeless throughout much of the Great Awakening.

So, in 1741, the pastor of the church in Enfield invited Jonathan Edwards to come and preach to his congregation. Jonathan Edwards had been one of the key leaders in the Great Awakening, as the revival really began in his congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts. The hope and prayer of the leadership of the church in Enfield was that God might move in Enfield as well through this man. The night before Edwards was to preach, Christians all around Enfield spent considerable time in prayer lest "while the divine showers were falling around them' Enfield would be passed by". ^[1]

On July 8th, 1741, Jonathan Edwards preached his sermon at the church in Enfield, Connecticut, and the effect was extraordinary. "Before the sermon was finished, people were moaning, groaning, and crying out such things as 'What shall I do to be saved?'" ^[2] One eyewitness said that "there was such a breathing of distress, and weeping, that the preacher was obliged to speak to the people and desire silence that he might be heard". ^[3]

Now, I know that many of you know the title of this sermon. It was entitled, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." The text Jonathan Edwards used was Deuteronomy 32:35, "Their foot shall slide in due time." In the sermon, Edwards described the nearness of judgment and the terrors of hell. Here are some quotes from the sermon, ...

The wrath of God is like great waters that are dammed for the present; they increase more and more, and rise higher and higher, till an outlet is given; and the longer the stream is stopped, the more rapid and mighty is its course, when once it is let loose.

It is true, that judgment against your evil works has not been executed hitherto; the floods of God's vengeance have been withheld; but your guilt in the mean time is constantly increasing, and you are every day treasuring up more wrath; the waters are constantly rising, and waxing more and more mighty; and there is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, that holds the waters back, that are unwilling to be stopped, and press hard to go forward. If God should only withdraw his hand from the flood-gate, it would immediately fly open, and the fiery floods of the fierceness and wrath of God, would rush forth with inconceivable fury, and would come upon you with omnipotent power; and if your strength were ten thousand times greater than it is, yea, ten thousand times greater than the strength of the stoutest, sturdiest devil in hell, it would be nothing to withstand or endure it.

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.

Now, in many ways, the sermon that Jonathan Edwards preached 260 years ago sounds like our text this morning: Hebrews 10:26-31. It is a text filled with the nearness of judgment and the terrors of hell. And in my message this morning, I want to highlight the sermon that Edwards preached. I plan on quoting from it several times because the theme is much the same, and because Jonathan Edwards said it far better than I can say it.

In Hebrews 10:26-31, we hear of the "terrifying expectation of judgment" (verse 27); the fury of a consuming fire (verse 27); merciless judgment (verse 29); the vengeance of the Lord; the terrors of falling into the hands of the living God. Listen for these things as you read, ...

Hebrews 10:26-31

For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay"

And again, "The LORD will judge His people." It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

I trust that you remember the structure of the book of Hebrews. Over and over and over again, the writer puts forth the excellency of Jesus Christ, showing how Jesus is so much better than anything that the Old Testament has to offer. Jesus is better than any other figure in the Old Testament, better than Moses and Aaron and any of the high priests, and better than Joshua and Abraham and Mechizedek. Jesus has offered up a better sacrifice. Jesus has made a better covenant. Jesus has entered a better tabernacle.

And intermingled among the glories of the greatness of Jesus Christ are five warnings. Each of them draw the natural conclusion from the greatness of Jesus. If Jesus is so great, we must hold fast our faith. If Jesus is so great, we must draw near to Him. If Jesus is so great, we must not fall away nor harden our hearts. Instead, we must press on to know Him and love Him.

As we come to our text, we come to the fourth warning section in the book of Hebrews. It is more intense than anything that we have seen up to this point. It is arguably the severest warning in the entire epistle. It is rich with judgment. It is rich with terror. It sounds like Jonathan Edwards. And perhaps my preaching this morning will sound a bit like his. My message this morning may seem a bit heavier and weightier than normal. It must be, because this is the word of God. If I sound dead-serious this morning, it's because our text is dead-serious. And to lighten it with frivolity and humor would bring cacophony to the text. Now, lest you think that I'm merely going to preach hell to you this morning, you are mistaken.

In this way, again, I will be like Jonathan Edwards. Many think that "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is all about the torments of the ungodly who find themselves in the fires of hell. But, one man rightly said, "the focus of the sermon is on the predicament of the sinner, how dreadfully he dangles just before he plunges to eternal agony, and while he has time to repent and be saved". ^[4] In other words, the sermon that Edwards preached at Enfield was decidedly evangelistic. He spoke of the closeness of judgment and the terrors of hell merely to show people of their true condition.

Edwards didn't leave things hopeless. Rather, he gave hope. He was calling them to escape the coming judgment. He was calling them to come to Christ and be saved! So, too, should our hearts be stirred.

Listen to how he ended his sermon. He ended with a plea for sinners to turn to Christ:

Therefore, let every one that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come. The wrath of Almighty God is now undoubtedly hanging over a great part of this congregation. Let every one fly out of Sodom: "Haste and escape for your lives, look not behind you, escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed."

Now, there may be some of you here this morning, who need to hear the message that Jonathan Edwards preached. You have heard about Jesus, but remain undecided to follow Him. You may be in a dangerous state! May my message this morning be the very thing that the Lord uses to give you eternal life.

My message this morning is entitled, "If We Go On Sinning Willfully" This is the main thought of the paragraph. Everything in verses 26-31 is applied to those who are indeed "sinning willfully." It's those who continue in willful sin who are in dangers of the judgment of God. It's upon them that the judgment will come. It's upon them that the judgment will come without mercy. It's upon them that the judgment will come with terror and fear.

So, the question naturally comes up, "What, then, does it mean 'sin willfully'?" One might easily come to think that this refers to the one struggling with habitual sin. It's the sin that seemingly you just can't seem to shake. It could be an addiction to a drug or sugar or caffeine or nicotine, constant anger or worry, pornography on the internet, bouts with depression, lack of prayer, lack of love. These sorts of things. You know that they are wrong, but you just can't seem to shake them. It's as if you are "sinning willfully."

Now, I don't believe that this is what the writer to the Hebrews had in mind. I'm not excusing any of these sorts of things. They are evil. They are wrong. We must battle against them with all of our might. We must plead with the Lord for deliverance from these things with prayer and fasting and tears and help from others. But, as long as we are in the flesh, we will battle these sorts of things. Paul wrote in Romans 7, ...

Romans 7:14-18

For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.

Such is the Christian life. It's a life-long battle with sin. Now, the good news is this. We can overcome all of these things. We have at our disposal the power of Christ. We have a great high priest over the house of God (Heb. 10:21), who is ready, willing and able to sympathize with us in all of our weaknesses (Heb. 4:15). He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted (Heb. 2:18). He is willing to extend mercy and grace in our time of need (Heb. 4:16). Jesus won't break off the battered reed. Nor will He put out the smoldering wick (Matt. 12:20). So, I don't believe that these sorts of things are what that author has in mind when he talks about "sinning willfully."

He's not talking about the one who hates his sin and is seeking help from Christ to escape the clutches of the sin. Now, the reason why I say this is because of the entire context of the book of Hebrews. It wasn't written to those struggling with besetting sin. Rather, it was originally written to a group of Jewish people, who had heard about Jesus and become interested in Him. They had come into the church and joined

the fellowship of other believers. Through time, they had come to hear much about Jesus. But, they were being pulled away to return to their Jewish roots. And those who returned were the ones who turned away from Christ, believing that they didn't need Him. They weren't pursuing him. Instead, they were denying Jesus. They were turning away from His love. They were seeking to be justified by some other way, rather than through the sacrifice of Christ. And in this way, they were "sinning willfully."

In verse 29, you see what they were doing. If you will, verse 29 is a help in defining exactly who is "sinning willfully." They were trampling under foot the Son of God. They were regarding as unclean the blood of the covenant. They were insulting the Spirit of grace. You see, fundamentally, they were "sinning willfully" against Jesus. They knew full well who He claimed to be. They knew full well what He came to do. And they rejected it all to go their own way. That's the thrust of verse 26, "If we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth."

In our context today, these would be those who used to be among the people of God, but have now forsaken Christ and His church. It would be those who have heard the gospel that sins are forgiven through faith in Christ, but they have rejected that message. They say, "It's not true" either with their mouths or by their lives.

"Sinning willfully" are those who abandoned any hope that they ever had in Christ. "I've heard you talk about Jesus. I know what He said. But, I want no part of Him. I'll place my hope elsewhere."

"Sinning willfully" are those who pursue their sin rather than pursuing Christ. "I know that Jesus says this is wrong. But, I don't believe Him. I don't believe that He's going to punish me. I'm going to do what I want to do."

"Sinning willfully" are those who abandon the church and end up "forsaking the assembling together" (as verse 25 said). "I've been in your assembly. You have some really nice people. But, this Jesus stuff is really too much for me. I can't stand to be with you anymore."

In all these things, they reject Christ, and put their true colors on display for all to see. As 1 John 2:19 says, "They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us." And for such people, the consequences are awful. Look at the end of verse 26, "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins." What a terrible consequence! No longer a sacrifice for sins??? No longer a sacrifice for sins! They have denied the blood of Jesus, and the blood of Jesus has denied them. In such a case, the blood of Jesus has no power. There is no way for sins to be forgiven! Feel the weight of such things! "No way for sins to be forgiven!"

This is equivalent to what was said in Hebrews 6, ...

Hebrews 6:4-6

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.

See, when you know so much about Jesus and then turn your back on Him, it is impossible to be renewed again to repentance. You have come too far. To turn away from Jesus and reject Him leaves no way for your sins to be forgiven. If you live like this, then in many ways, you are worse off now than you were before. Hear the testimony of Peter in 2 Peter 2:20-21:

2 Peter 2:20-21

For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them.

They are worse off, because they sin against all knowledge, and such requires a greater punishment. For them, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins!

What a contrast this is to those who have come into the New Covenant. Look back at verse 17, "And their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more." Such is the promise of the New Covenant. This is the promise of God to all who trust in Christ. He will no longer remember our sins!

And then, the implication comes in verse 18, "Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin." Notice, this is almost exactly what verse 26 says, but from a totally opposite perspective. For those in the New Covenant, there is no longer any offering for sin, because sin has been removed. Our sin has been born upon the cross. "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness" (1 Peter 2:24). But, the terrifying thing for those who have turned their backs on Jesus is that there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins. They still have to deal with their sins. And they may search high and low for a way to rid themselves of their sin, but no suitable sacrifice will be found. This is because, "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins."

Instead, we see in verse 27 what awaits them. "But a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries." This is my first point. "If We Go On Sinning Willfully" ...

1. Judgment will be certain (verses 26-27)

The judgment day will come. It's like the criminal, who was caught red-handed by the justice department and is sitting in jail. His court date is

set. His guilty verdict is all set. His judgment is certain. He's merely waiting for the date to come. And is the case for those who are "sinning willfully." All they can expect is judgment. Judgment will be certain! Judgment is coming.

In verse 27, the author quotes from Isaiah 26:11. In that passage, there's a contrast between the righteous and the wicked. The righteous are those who have trusted in Him (Is. 26:3-4). They have lived righteously (Is. 26:7). They have followed in the ways of God (Is. 26:8). They have waited for the LORD (Is. 26:8). Their hearts have longed for the LORD (Is. 26:8-9). They have sought Him diligently (Is. 26:8).

The wicked, on the other hand, had not learned righteousness, though they lived among a righteous people. They had dealt unjustly with those who trusted in the LORD, and they did not perceive the majesty of the LORD (Is. 26:10). As a result, God's hand is against them (Is. 26:11) and fire will come and devour the wicked (Is. 26:11).

Isaiah 26 is one of those prophetic passages in which the LORD comforts His people by telling them that He's going to make all of the wrongs right. He tells His people that He has seen the evil and injustice done by the wicked. Don't fear; they will burn. And the author to the Hebrews brings this matter of certainty to the text here. Those who go on sinning willfully can only expect judgment to come.

I do believe that this is referring to the fiery flames of final judgment. When Jesus spoke of hell, he often spoke of a hot, fiery place. In telling the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus described the rich man as being in a flame filled place, where he sought any sort of relief from the heat that he could get (Luke 16:24). In telling of the final judgment, Jesus said that the goats would go "into the eternal fire" (Matt. 25:41). The book of Revelation finishes the judgment with Satan, the beast, the false prophet, and all who followed them being thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the torment will continue on day and night forever and ever (Rev. 20:10, 14-15). And that's the picture given here. Final judgment will be a fiery torment - forever and ever.

When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego failed to bow down and worship Nebuchadnezzar, his wrath burned so greatly that he ordered the furnace to be heated seven times hotter than before. But, surely, the flames of God's wrath will be greater still. Church family, you do not want to experience these things! They are too awful to tell.

Listen again to the words of Jonathan Edwards, ...

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment.

Such is the fate of upon those who "go on sinning willfully." Judgment will be certain (verses 26-27).

As we continue on in our text, we see that
2. Judgment will be merciless (verses 28-29)

"If We Go On Sinning Willfully", judgment will be merciless.

Hebrews 10:28-29

Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?

The law of Moses knew little mercy for those who sinned with a high hand of rebellion. With the testimony of two or three witnesses came death in a number of cases. Consider Numbers 15:32-36, ...

Numbers 15:32-36

Now while the sons of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering wood on the Sabbath day. Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation; and they put him in custody because it had not been declared what should be done to him. Then the LORD said to Moses, "The man shall surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp." So all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death with stones, just as the LORD had commanded Moses.

Do you want to go and mow your lawn this afternoon? Under the law of Moses, such an action would mean death to you. Listen to the law of Moses regarding rebellious children, ...

Deut. 21:18-21

If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they chastise him, he will not even listen to them, then his father and mother shall seize him, and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gateway of his home town. And they shall say to the elders of his city, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard." Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death; so you shall remove the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear [of it] and fear.

Children, have you ever been rebellious toward your parents? Under the law of Moses, you deserve to be stoned to death.

Consider the story of Achan. He was in the army that walked around Jericho for 7 days. He was involved in overtaking the city. But, he took from the booty of Jericho that was banned. He and his family were stoned to death for his sin. No mercy was shown (Joshua 7).

Similar commands are given in the law of Moses for the one who engages in idolatry (Deut. 17:2-7) or commits adultery (Deut. 22:22) or rape (Deut. 22:25-27). There is no mercy; only judgment.

You think that's bad? It's far worse if you turn away from Christ. It's one thing to turn away from Moses. That's the lesser crime. It's another thing to turn away from Jesus. That's the greater crime. We go from the lesser (verse 28) to the greater (verse 29).

Let's pick it up again in verse 28, ...

Hebrews 10:28-29

Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?

If the law of Moses showed no mercy when a crime was committed, how much less mercy will you expect when you sin against the Son of God and His offer of grace to you? "How much more severe a punishment do you think he will deserve." The answer is really, infinitely more severe.

We often think of the New Testament as filled with grace. And it is. But, the implication of an offer of grace is that the refusal to repent is an insult to God. It's one thing to sin against a cold law. It's another thing to sin against the living God. The sin is greater. Therefore, the punishment will be worse. The greater the transgression, the greater the punishment. Which of you wish to face a more severe punishment than the saints of the Old Testament?

Look what takes place when you go on sinning willfully. In verse 29 there are three things. First, you trample under foot the Son of God. Second, you regard as unclean the blood of the covenant. Third, you insult the Spirit of grace. Let's spend a few moments unpacking these things.

Trampling under foot is a sign of hatred and disdain. It shows that you despise the one trod underfoot. Jezebel, the hated woman in Israel was given over to her enemies and trampled under foot by horses. That was an intentional act to show how much she was despised (2 Kings 9:32). Now, imagine doing this to the "Son of God." It's almost unthinkable to think of the magnitude of the insult. But, such are those who reject the grace of God in the Son of God.

The second thing that takes place when you go on sinning willfully that you regard as unclean the blood of the covenant. This is talking about the blood of Jesus. Peter calls the blood of Christ, "precious blood" (1 Peter 1:19). He considers the blood of Christ to be more valuable than silver or gold (1 Peter 1:18). It's the blood of Christ that cleanses us from our sins. Jesus will be forever worshiped as the Lamb of God who purchased us with His blood (Rev. 5:9). When John was given the Revelation, he was shown some believers who had "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev 7:14). Now, imagine taking the blood of Christ and treating it like bathwater. You just throw it out in the lawn, getting rid of it, so that you can clean the bucket, which was made dirty by the water.

Finally, the third thing that takes place when you go on sinning willfully: you insult the Spirit of grace. The Spirit of grace here is probably a reference to the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity, who is involved in extending grace to sinners. To reject the grace offered in Christ is to insult God. It is to spit in His face. It is to call Him dirty names. It is to slur His reputation and to call His character into question. And you know what happens when people are insulted. They get angry. And those who insult the Spirit of grace will face the unmerciful wrath of God.

Listen again to Jonathan Edwards, ...

Consider this, you that are here present, that yet remain in an unregenerate state. That God will execute the fierceness of his anger, implies, that he will inflict wrath without any pity. When God beholds the ineffable extremity of your case, and sees your torment to be so vastly disproportioned to your strength, and sees how your poor soul is crushed, and sinks down, as it were, into an infinite gloom; He will have no compassion upon you, he will not forbear the executions of his wrath, or in the least lighten his hand; there shall be no moderation or mercy, nor will God then at all stay his rough wind; He will have no regard to your welfare, nor be at all careful lest you suffer too much in any other sense, than only that you shall not suffer beyond what strict justice requires. Nothing shall be withheld.

Church family, you don't want that! So, believe in Christ. Trust in Him! As Edwards continues, ...

Now God stands ready to pity you; this is a day of mercy; you may cry now with some encouragement of obtaining mercy.

But when once the day of mercy is past, your most lamentable and dolorous cries and shrieks will be in vain; you will be wholly lost and thrown away of God, as to any regard to your welfare. God will have no other use to put you to, but to suffer misery; you shall be continued in being to no other end; for you will be a vessel of wrath fitted to destruction; and there will be no other use of this vessel, but to be filled full of wrath. God will be so far from pitying you when you cry to him, that it is

said he will only "laugh and mock," Prov. i. 25, 26&c.

Before we continue to our last point, I do want to point out that there are those who take these words and take them to mean that you can lose your salvation. Particularly the second characteristic, "[he] has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified." "See," they say, "he was sanctified at one time by the blood of Christ. But now is no longer in the covenant." Such is a legitimate reading of these words. However, I do not believe that such a reading does justice to the rest of the Scripture, even the Scripture here in verse 18.

When you enter into the New Covenant (by faith in Christ), your sins are wiped away, never to return again. There is no longer any offering that you need to make for sin. Your sin will never return again to you. The question then comes, "what does the writer here mean when he says that they were at one time sanctified?" I think that the best way to understand this is to understand the sanctifying influence of the people of God upon someone's life.

To be in the church brings with it a measure of sanctification. It's a bit like a marriage where one spouse is a believer and the other is an unbeliever. Listen to Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:14, "For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his [believing] wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband." And that's what has taken place with the Jews to whom this letter was addressed. They had come into the church and had enjoyed the sanctifying influence of the body of Christ. Perhaps they began to shed some of their former sins. Perhaps they cleaned up their language a bit. Perhaps they conformed their lives to the law of God. But, that's not their condition now. Now that they are apart from the people of God, they are away from the sanctifying influence in their lives. They are away from the church. And they are far from Christ. And their prospect is bleak.

Now, in some regards, in our text this morning, it doesn't really matter whether these are saved people who have lost their salvation, or whether they were never saved to begin with. We need not wrangle about those words now. We need to come to the realization that in either case, such a condition is terrible. Those who go on sinning willfully (by forsaking Christ) will face a merciless judgment, because they have mocked God. Oh, church family, may these words never be said of us. May we be those who hold high the Son of God. May we be those who cherish the work of Jesus on the cross. May we be those who honor the Spirit of grace in our lives.

Well, let's move on to our third point this morning. We have seen that Judgment will be certain (verses 26-27) and Judgment will be merciless (verses 28-29). Now finally, ...

3. Judgment will be fearful (verses 30-31)

Verse 30 quotes two Old Testament texts regarding the final judgment. Verse 31 then draws the natural conclusion.

Hebrews 10:30-31

For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay" And again, "The LORD will judge His people." It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

The first quote comes from the same text that Jonathan Edwards used for his sermon in Enfield, Deuteronomy 32:35. Listen to the text as it reads in the Old Testament: "Vengeance is Mine, and retribution, In due time their foot will slip." In other words, God is in total control of the judgment. It's all in His hands.

In Edward's sermon, he makes the point over and over and over again, that it's only the pleasure of God that has withheld the judgment. He said, ...

"There is no want in the power of God to cast wicked men into hell at any moment. ...

We find it easy to tread on and crush a worm that we see crawling on the earth; so it is easy for us to cut or singe a slender thread that any thing hangs by: thus easy is it for God, when he pleases, to cast his enemies down to hell. ...

They deserve to be cast into hell; so that divine justice never stands in the way, it makes no objection against God's using his power at any moment to destroy them. Yea, on the contrary, justice calls aloud for an infinite punishment of their sins. ...

They are already under a sentence of condemnation to hell. They do not only justly deserve to be cast down thither, but the sentence of the law of God, that eternal and immutable rule of righteousness that God has fixed between him and mankind, is gone out against them, and stands against them; so that they are bound over already to hell. John 3:18. "He that believeth not is condemned already." ...

The reason why they are not fallen already, and do not fall now is only that God's appointed time is not come. For it is said, that when that due time, or appointed time comes, their foot shall slide. ...

There is nothing that keeps wicked men at any one moment out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God." -- By the mere pleasure of God, I mean his sovereign pleasure, his arbitrary will, restrained by no obligation, hindered by no manner of difficulty.

God says, "Vengeance is mine! I will repay! In due time, their foot shall slip." This means that everything is at the disposal of God's hand in the matter. We have no control over the judgment of God. He will bring it when He wants in His way.

The next quotation from the next verse in Deuteronomy. It continues on the same theme: God is in total control of the judgment that comes. "The Lord will judge His people." This is talking about Israel. By application today, it's talking about His church. God will deal appropriately with His people. In the context of Deuteronomy, these words come as comfort. Judgment, not in the sense of punishment. But, judgment in the sense of vindication. The next phrase in Deuteronomy says, "[The LORD] will have compassion on His servants." Those who serve the LORD will find compassion on the day of judgment. Those who serve the LORD will find mercy on the day of judgment. But, for those who go on sinning willfully and turn their backs on Christ, nothing but terror awaits them.

That's why we read in verse 31, ...

Hebrews 10:31

It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

I can do no better than Jonathan Edwards, ...

How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in the danger of this great wrath and infinite misery! But this is the dismal case of every soul in this congregation that has not been born again, however moral and strict, sober and religious, they may otherwise be. Oh that you would consider it, whether you be young or old! There is reason to think, that there are many in this congregation now hearing this discourse, that will actually be the subjects of this very misery to all eternity. We know not who they are, or in what seats they sit, or what thoughts they now have. It may be they are now at ease, and hear all these things without much disturbance, and are now flattering themselves that they are not the persons, promising themselves that they shall escape. If we knew that there was one person, and but one, in the whole congregation, that was to be the subject of this misery, what an awful thing would it be to think of! If we knew who it was, what an awful sight would it be to see such a person! How might all the rest of the congregation lift up a lamentable and bitter cry over him! But, alas! instead of one, how many is it likely will remember this discourse in hell?

When you think of the realities of life and death and judgment and hell, it is a fearful thing.

Now, as I close my message this morning, I want to end with hope because the writer to the Hebrews gave hope. Hope was given in verses 19-25: "We have confidence to enter the holy place, ... We have a great priest over the house of God! ... let us draw near! ... let us hold fast! ... let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds." Let us not go on sinning willfully, because a fearful judgment will come if we do.

But, if we continue on with verse 32, ...

Hebrews 10:32-35

But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one. Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.

The writer to the Hebrews was confident that his readers, by in large, were in the covenant. They had demonstrated it through their faithfulness in suffering that Jesus was a reality in their lives. Now was not the time to forsake Him. But, the warning is here for a reason. There were some who were sinning willfully and were soon to face the terrors of judgment. But listen: the terrors of judgment don't have to come upon you. God has provided a way of escape. Even through the fear, there is hope.

I close with one last quote from Jonathan Edwards.

... It is doubtless the case of some whom you have seen and known, that never deserved hell more than you, and that heretofore appeared as likely to have been now alive as you.

Their case is past all hope; they are crying in extreme misery and perfect despair; but here you are in the land of the living and in the house of God, and have an opportunity to obtain salvation. What would not those poor damned hopeless souls give for one day's opportunity such as you now enjoy! ...

And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open, and stands in calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners; a day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God. Many are daily coming from the east, west, north and south; many that were very lately in the same miserable condition that you are in, are now in a happy state, with their hearts filled with love to him who has loved them, and washed them from their sins in his own blood, and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God. How awful is it to be left behind at such a day! To see so many others feasting, while you are pining and perishing! To see so many rejoicing and singing for joy of heart, while you have cause to mourn for sorrow of heart, and howl for vexation of spirit! How can you rest one moment in such a condition?

Oh, may God grant you no rest this morning until you have settled your soul.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on September 5, 2010 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Iain Murray, Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography (Edinburgh; Banner of Truth, 1987, p. 168).

[2] John Currid in a foreword to Jonathan Edwards' sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

[3] Ibid. Reported by A. O. Aldridge, Jonathan Edwards (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), p. 30

[4] Ibid. E. H. Cady, "The Artistry of Jonathan Edwards," New England Quarterly 22 (1949):61-72