

The American Jeremiad

The following selections are examples of American jeremiads — sermons, speeches, visual texts, or essays that, in the words of the scholar Sacvan Bercovitch, “unify a people by creating tension between ideal social life and its real manifestation.” The traditional jeremiad presents a biblical or spiritual ideal for behavior, then describes the ways individuals and communities have fallen from those standards, and finally provides a vision for an ideal public life that will result from a return to these high standards. It is named after the biblical lamentations of the prophet Jeremiah, who prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem because the Israelites had turned their back on the Lord and were worshipping false idols. Speaking through Jeremiah, God said, “I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed: how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto me?” (Jeremiah 2:21). The American version of the jeremiad began as a rhetorical strategy of Puritan preachers looking to set high standards and high hopes in the New World, but the form has continued to find a home in American discourse because of the lofty ideals outlined in the nation’s founding documents and a strongly optimistic belief in progress.

Sources

- John Winthrop, from *A Modell of Christian Charity* (1630)
- Jonathan Edwards, from *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (1741)
- Frederick Douglass, from *What, to the Slave, Is the Fourth of July?* (1852)
- Robert F. Kennedy, *The Mindless Menace of Violence* (1968)
- Ronald Reagan, from *Farewell Address* (1989)
- Stephen H. Webb, *How Soccer Is Ruining America: A Jeremiad* (2009)
- American Lung Association, *Sandwich. Snack. Arsenic.* (2011)
- Barack Obama, *Tucson Memorial Speech* (2011)

from *A Modell of Christian Charity*

JOHN WINTHROP

John Winthrop (1588–1649) was governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, a settlement founded by a group of entrepreneurs who left Europe for opportunities in the New World. He was a Puritan, like most of the members of the group, and central to their vision was an ideal community in which all citizens would focus their lives on the word of God. Interestingly, this pursuit of a perfect society based on the teachings of the Bible resulted in tremendous secular success as well. Winthrop gave this speech on board the ship *Arabella*, on its way from England to the New World in 1630. The speech was, in some ways, a pep talk — to calm

the immigrants' fears about what they would face in the New World — but it was also an exhortation to create an ideal community based on their covenant with God.

It rests now to make some application of this discourse by the present design, which gave the occasion of writing of it. Herein are four things to be propounded: first, the persons; secondly, the work; thirdly, the end; fourthly, the means.

First for the persons. We are a company professing ourselves fellow members of Christ, in which respect only though we were absent from each other many miles, and had our employments as far distant, yet we ought to account ourselves knit together by this bond of love, and live in the exercise of it, if we would have comfort of our being in Christ. This was notorious in the practice of the Christians in former times; as is testified of the Waldenses, from the mouth of one of the adversaries *Æneas Sylvius*, "mutuo [ament] pene antequam norunt," they use to love any of their own religion even before they were acquainted with them.

Secondly for the work we have in hand. It is by a mutual consent, through a special overvaluing providence and a more than an ordinary approbation of the churches of Christ, to seek out a place of cohabitation and consortship under a due form of government both civil and ecclesiastical. In such cases as this, the care of the public must oversway all private respects, by which not only conscience but mere civil policy doth bind us. For it is a true rule that particular estates cannot subsist in the ruin of the public.

Thirdly, the end is to improve our lives to do more service to the Lord; the comfort and encrease of the body of Christ whereof we are members; that ourselves and posterity may be the better preserved from the common corruptions of this evil world, to serve the Lord and work out our salvation under the power and purity of his holy ordinances.

Fourthly, for the means whereby this must be effected. They are twofold, a conformity with the work and end we aim at. These we see are extraordinary, therefore we must not content ourselves with usual ordinary means. Whatsoever we did or ought to have done when we lived in England, the same must we do, and more also, where we go. That which the most in their churches maintain as a truth in profession only, we must bring into familiar and constant practice, as in this duty of love. We must love brotherly without dissimulation; we must love one another with a pure heart fervently. We must bear one another's burthens. We must not look only on our own things, but also on the things of our brethren, neither must we think that the Lord will bear with such failings at our hands as he doth from those among whom we have lived; and that for three reasons:

First, in regard of the more near bond of marriage between him and us, wherein he hath taken us to be his after a most strict and peculiar manner, which will make him the more jealous of our love and obedience. So he tells the people of Israel, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth, therefore will I punish you for your transgressions." Secondly, because the Lord will be sanctified in them that come near him. We know that there were many that corrupted the service of the Lord, some

setting up altars before his own, others offering both strange fire and strange sacrifices also; yet there came no fire from heaven or other sudden judgment upon them, as did upon Nadab and Abihu, who yet we may think did not sin presumptuously. Thirdly, when God gives a special commission he looks to have it strictly observed in every article. When he gave Saul a commission to destroy Amalek, he indented with him upon certain articles, and because he failed in one of the least, and that upon a fair pretense, it lost him the kingdom which should have been his reward if he had observed his commission.

Thus stands the cause between God and us. We are entered into covenant with him for this work. We have taken out a commission, the Lord hath given us leave to draw our own articles. We have professed to enterprise these actions, upon these and those ends, we have hereupon besought him of favor and blessing. Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath he ratified this covenant and sealed our commission, [and] will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it. But if we shall neglect the observation of these articles which are the ends we have propounded and, dissembling with our God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us, be revenged of such a perjured people, and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant.

Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together in this work as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection, we must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality. We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us as his own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of his wisdom, power, goodness, and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when he shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, "the Lord make it like that of New England." For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are agoing.

And to shut up this discourse with that exhortation of Moses, that faithful servant of the Lord, in his last farewell to Israel, Deuteronomy 30: Beloved, there is now

set before us life and good, death and evil, in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk in his ways and to keep his commandments and his ordinance and his laws, and the articles of our covenant with him, that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it. But if our hearts shall turn away, so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worship other gods, our pleasures and profits, and serve them; it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it.

Therefore let us choose life,
that we and our seed
may live by obeying his
voice and cleaving to him,
for he is our life and
our prosperity.

(1630)

Questions

1. As you read, look for the words and images that Governor John Winthrop uses to create a sense of community in his audience. How does he use them to develop his vision of an ideal community? Have you run across these words and images in other sermons and public speeches? If so, explain.
2. Look carefully at the two metaphors — the shipwreck and the shining city on the hill — in paragraph 8. How does each one help the speech fit the requirements of a jeremiad?
3. What do you think Winthrop means when he says that “the care of the public must overshadow all private respects” (par. 3)? What suggestions does he make for ensuring the “care of the public”?
4. What contrasts does Winthrop set up in his speech? How do they help guide his instructions for creating a colonial enterprise that balances religion and commerce?
5. How does Winthrop address what the new colonists are leaving behind? How does he focus them on the future?

from *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*

JONATHAN EDWARDS

Preached on July 8, 1741, in Enfield, Massachusetts (now Connecticut), this sermon was written by the Yale-educated Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758). Edwards was a Congregational minister whose education was influenced both by the open-mindedness of the Enlightenment and the strict Calvinist theology of Puritanism. “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is considered typical of

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sermons of the Great Awakening, a movement that emphasized both the positive and the negative images of God's power, especially the belief that hell was real rather than metaphorical and that it was the fate of those who did not embrace the majesty of God.

This that you have heard is the case of everyone of you that are out of Christ. That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone is extended abroad under you. *There* is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell's wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor anything to take hold of: there is nothing between you and hell but the air; 'tis only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up.

You probably are not sensible of this; you find you are kept out of hell, but don't see the hand of God in it, but look at other things, as the good state of your bodily constitution, your care of your own life, and the means you use for your own preservation. But indeed these things are nothing; if God should withdraw his hand, they would avail no more to keep you from falling, than the thin air to hold up a person that is suspended in it.

Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness, would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock. . . . There are the black clouds of God's wrath now hanging directly over your heads, full of the dreadful storm, and big with thunder; and were it not for the restraining hand of God it would immediately burst forth upon you. The sovereign pleasure of God for the present stays his rough wind; otherwise it would come with fury, and your destruction would come like a whirlwind, and you would be like the chaff of the summer threshing floor.

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. 'Tis 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 meantime is constantly increasing, and you are every day treasuring up more wrath; the waters are continually 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 floodgate, 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. . . .

And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has flung⁵ the door of mercy wide open, and stands in the door 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 in now an happy state, with their hearts filled with love to him that 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? Are not your souls as precious as the souls of the people at Suffield,⁴ where they are flocking from day to day to Christ?

(1741)

Questions

1. How does Jonathan Edwards personalize hell for his listeners?
2. In addition to the terrifying description of hell, what other ways does Edwards appeal to his audience to heed his warnings and turn to Christ?
3. Historians consider the sermons of Edwards and other Great Awakening revivalists to have helped sow the seeds of the American Revolution. What is it about a sermon like this that might have encouraged disassociation from English authority?
4. What evidence do you find in this sermon that Edwards knew about the newly recognized physical property of gravity, discovered by Isaac Newton?
5. The American lawyer Clarence Darrow said of Jonathan Edwards, "Nothing but a distorted or diseased mind could have produced his 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.' Nothing but the puritanical, cruel generation in which he lived could have tolerated it." And yet, we continue to read it today and consider it a classic of early American literature. What does it have to offer a modern reader? What does it tell us about the important transitions in American history? How does it connect old and new ideas, such as individual freedom versus political or clerical authority, even science versus scripture?

from *What, to the Slave, Is the Fourth of July?*

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), an escaped slave who became a passionate orator and crusader against slavery, gave this speech—arguably his most famous—in Rochester, New York, at a Fourth of July celebration, an event many American cities marked with readings of the Declaration of Independence. The speech