Puritans saw the world as wholly polluted with sin, even themselves, and as such, worthy of nothing better than the torments of hell. They were, after all, the shameful consummation of original sin, a separation from God’s grace that marked the beginning of a death begun at conception.\footnote{Gordon Geddes, \textit{Welcome Joy: Death in Puritan New England}. 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research, 1981), 5.} ‘Thou shalt be always dying, dying, till thou art perfectly dead,’ Samuel Willard concluded, for ‘the miseries of this life differ not from those that follow, so much for kind, as degree.’\footnote{Ibid., 4.} Further, hell’s proximity to the physical world meant that Puritans were daily confronted with wicked temptation, Satan’s attempts to turn man’s eyes from God and instill active sin in him. Love of and delight in the transitory physical world was among the worst and easiest of these offenses. Puritans therefore guarded themselves virulently against forming too fond of attachments to anything in this life, which manifested itself culturally as a battle between the flesh and the spirit, a metaphor that an anonymous poet captured well:

\begin{quote}
Be still thou unregenerate part, / Disturb no more my setled heart, / For I have vow’d (and so will doe) / Thee as a foe, still to pursue. / And combate with thee will and must, / Untill I see thee laid in th’ dust. / Sisters we are, yea twins we be, / Yet deadly feud ’twixt thee and me.\footnote{“The Flesh and the Spirit,” in \textit{The Complete Works of Puritan Poets}, ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and Allan R. Robb (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), ll. 7–14.}
\end{quote}

All Puritans understood the deadly feud to which Bradstreet referred, and considered it a lifelong battle. Birth was not simply the beginning of death; birth began a Puritan’s permanent confrontation with life, a singular journey to repulse the sinful attachments of this world and search for signs of redemption, though man, in his naturally wicked nature, was not worthy of God’s grace and deserved eternal damnation.
The Puritan did have an escape from the fiery depths of hell: God’s election. Puritan theology recognized predestination, the idea that God chose to save a select number of souls from hell before birth. Thus, technically, the Puritan could do nothing for his own salvation, other than accept God’s will and search for signs that he might be among God’s elect.⁴

From this idea sprang the covenant of grace, in which man “turned up toward God’s eternal counsel” and accepted his omnipotence; “the covenant, he [William Perkins] said, is ‘absolutely necessary for salvation’.”⁵ Further, Puritan society ordained that man had to freely enter the covenant. God chose his elect, but in turn, man had to choose God. Puritans socially acknowledged man’s acceptance of God through the conversion experience, which struck one suddenly—a “heart wrenched from depravity to grace”—but man had to predispose or prepare himself before it could occur.

Further, to socially legitimize a conversion experience, one had to relate it convincingly to the heads of the church in order to gain church membership. Without membership, a person would not be considered among God’s elect or considered a full member of society. Therefore, the conversion experience was a critical part of every Puritan’s life, both socially and spiritually. “The most crucial event in the life of each person was his effectual calling or conversion which turned him once for all from death to life.”⁷ It was in this way alone, Puritans believed, that man could be saved the horrors of hell and of death.

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⁶ Ibid., para. 7.


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