

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

## Issue 8: Jonathan Edwards & the Great Awakening

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### Resolutions of Jonathan Edwards

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Typical of many other serious young men of his day, the young Jonathan Edwards drew up a list of resolutions, committing himself to a God-centered life lived in harmony with others. The list, excerpted here, was probably first written down in 1722 and added to at several times in his lifetime. There are seventy resolutions in all. The excerpts here give a picture of the seriousness and resolve with which Edwards approached life.

Being sensible that I am unable to do any thing without God's help, I do humbly intreat Him by His grace to enable me to keep these resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to His will, for Christ's sake.

**Resolved**, That I will do whatsoever I think to be most to God's glory, and my own good, profit and pleasure, in the whole of my duration.

**Resolved** to do whatever I think to be my duty, and most for the good and advantage of mankind in general.

**Resolved** to do this, whatever difficulties I meet with, how many and how great soever.

**Resolved**, Never to lose one moment of time, but improve it the most profitable way I possibly can.

**Resolved**, Never to do any thing, which I should be afraid to do, if it were the last hour of my life.

**Resolved**, To be endeavoring to find out fit objects of charity and liberality.

**Resolved**, To maintain the strictest temperance in eating and drinking.

**Resolved**, Never to do any thing, which if I should see in another, I should count a just occasion to despise him for, or to think any way the more meanly of him.

**Resolved**, To study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.

**Resolved**, To strive to my utmost every week to be brought higher in religion, and to a higher exercise of grace, than I was the week before.

**Resolved**, To ask myself at the end of every day, week, month and year, wherein I could possibly in any respect have done better.

**Resolved**, Frequently to renew the dedication of myself to God, which was made at my baptism, which I solemnly renewed, when I was received into the communion of the church; and which I have solemnly re-made this twelfth day of January, 1722–3.

**Resolved**, Never hence-forward, till I die, to act as if I were any way my own, but entirely and altogether God's.

**Resolved**, I will act so as I think I shall judge would have been best, and most prudent, when I come into the future world.

**Resolved**, Never to give over, nor in the least to slacken my fight with my corruptions, however unsuccessful I may be.

**Resolved**, After afflictions, to inquire, what I am the better for them, what good I have got by them, and what I might have got by them.

Although his biography presents many dramatic contrasts, these were in reality only different facets of a common allegiance to a sovereign God. Thus, Edwards both preached ferocious hell-fire sermons and expressed lyrical appreciations of nature because the God who created the world in all its beauty was also perfect in holiness. Edwards combined herculean intellectual labors with child-like piety because he perceived God as both infinitely complex and blissfully simple. In his Northampton church his consistent exaltation of divine majesty led to very different results—he was first lionized as a great leader and then dismissed from his pulpit. Edwards held that the omnipotent deity required repentance and faith from his human creatures so he proclaimed both the absolute sovereignty of God and the urgent responsibilities of men.

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## Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening: From the Publisher

**This is our fourth issue this year and completes our first year as a quarterly publication.**

Four other issues appeared as an "occasional" publication. Thus, we now have published eight issues.

We still have no paid or fulltime staff and management, and administration is done on a volunteer basis. We are most thankful to those who have worked long and hard to make this magazine possible.

We are also indebted to you readers who take the time to write and give us your suggestions. Several future issues are now in process as a direct response to reader recommendations.

When we first started, a dedicated Christian young person, a college graduate, asked with a straight face: "Is there enough material available to keep on publishing in the future?" No joke. Perhaps you can appreciate our actual dilemma—what do we choose to extract from the seemingly inexhaustible mine of resources.

Jonathan Edwards is *the first American* to be treated in a full issue. The selection needs no justification. You will want to read more Edwards after reading this issue. The Banner of Truth Trust (Box 621, Carlisle, Pennsylvania 17013) has published *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* in two thick volumes of very small print. The strain on the eyes is more than compensated by the 2000 pages of food for the mind and heart. They have other Edwards volumes in more comfortable print including his works on the revival and love.

You will recall from our Zwingli issue that a decisive point in the Reformation came at the Colloquy of Marburg in 1529 when Zwingli and Luther agreed on all points of doctrine except the Lord's Supper and so went their separate ways. The Lord's Supper was also the issue when Edwards' congregation dismissed him as pastor at Northampton, Massachusetts. They would not accept his position that unbelievers should not be admitted to the Lord's table.

Edwards' farewell sermon is a classic. He commented to his flock:

"As you would seek the future prosperity of this society, it is of vast importance that you should avoid contention.

"A contentious people will be a miserable people. The contentions which have been among you, since I first became your pastor, have been one of the greatest burdens I have labored under in the course of my ministry—not only the contentions you have had with me, but those which you have had with one another, about your lands and other concerns—because I knew that contention, heat of spirit, evil speaking, and things of the like nature, were directly contrary to the spirit of Christianity, and did in a peculiar manner, tend to drive away God's Spirit from a people, and to render all means of grace ineffectual, as well as destroy a people's outward comfort and welfare.

"Let me therefore earnestly exhort you as you would seek your own future good, hereafter to watch against a contentious spirit. 'If you would see good days, seek peace, and ensue it' (I

Peter 3:10–11). Let the late contention about the terms of Christian communion, as it has been the greatest, be the last. I would, now as I am preaching my farewell sermon, say to you, as the apostle to the Corinthians, 2 Cor. 13:11 'Finally brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.' "

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## Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening: Did You Know?

**Jonathan Edwards** was *the only son in a family of eleven children*. He and his wife Sarah had eleven children of their own.

Though John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards were born the same year (1703) and admired each other's evangelistic work, *the two men never met*. Both were friends of George Whitefield and both emphasized the need for conversion and heartfelt religion. Edwards read Wesley's *Hymns and Sacred Poems* and Wesley supervised the publication in England of Edwards' *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion*.

Edwards' *reputation as a dramatic hell-fire preacher is largely undeserved*. He usually spoke quietly and with dignity, though emphatically, and his voice was unsuitable for preaching to large crowds. He never used loud volume or exaggerated gestures to make his points, for he relied on striking imagery and the logical argument of his sermons.

As part of his daily devotions, Edwards rode his horse into the woods and walked alone, meditating. He would *write notes to himself* on scraps of paper and *pin them to his coat*. On returning home, he would be met by Sarah, who would help unpin his notes.

Edwards advanced and supported the Great Awakening in New England, but *viewed with suspicion the emotional excesses* generated by the revival. While he encouraged repentance and heartfelt devotion to God, he was bothered somewhat by the shrieking, trances, and ecstatic deliriums that often accompanied the revivals. While the physical signs did not discredit the Awakening for Edwards, he felt some pastors placed an undue emphasis on outward signs.

Though trained to be logical and rational, Edwards *insisted that true religion is primarily rooted in the affections*, not in reason. He wrote the famous *Treatise on Religious Affections* to prove his point, and in the treatise he reveals his own deep feelings of religious devotion.

Edwards, who wrote at age thirteen an essay on spiders, always was interested in scientific matters and *saw no warfare between religion and science*. He read and appreciated the works of Sir Isaac Newton, and *felt that good theology and good science would support and complement each other*, since both were involved in the quest for truth. In writing the narrative of the New England revivals, Edwards tried to be as empirical and objectively analytical as any physicist or chemist.

After twenty-three years as pastor at Northampton, Edwards was dismissed from his post in 1750. The congregation was enraged at Edwards' insistence that *only persons who had made a profession of faith could be admitted to the Lord's Supper*. Fifty years earlier, Edwards' grandfather Solomon Stoddard had opened the Lord's Supper at Northampton to all who would come. The people at Northampton were determined not to have the privilege revoked, so they asked Edwards to leave.

From 1743 on, Edwards was in frequent correspondence with several Scottish ministers, all *evangelical Calvinists* like himself. Edwards discussed theology with his correspondents and kept them apprised on the revivals in New England. His Scottish friends helped spread Edwards' fame in Great Britain. When Edwards was ousted from his Northampton pulpit, his Scottish friends suggested

that he emigrate to Scotland and serve a Presbyterian church there.

Edwards never completed his ***History of the Work of Redemption***, a massive theological treatise in the form of a history. To prepare himself for the task, he read every historical work he could lay his hands on. He planned to ***trace the workings of God from Creation to his own day***. The groundwork for the treatise, a series of lectures given in 1739, was published in Scotland in 1774 and in America in 1786.

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## Excerpts from the Life of Jonathan Edwards

SAMUEL HOPKINS Samuel Hopkins was a student, friend, and admirer of Jonathan Edwards, and a frequent visitor to the Edwards home in Northampton. Impressed by Edwards and the serenity of the Edwards family, Hopkins penned the first biography of his famous teacher. The full title of the biography is *The Life and Character of the Late Reverend Mr. Jonathan Edwards*. It was first published in 1765. These excerpts are representative of Hopkins' style

***In this world, so full of darkness and delusion, it is of great importance that all should be able to distinguish between true religion and that which is false. In this, perhaps none has taken more pains, or labored more successfully, than he whose life is set before the reader (from the Preface).***

He had a strict and inviolable regard to justice in all his dealings with his neighbors, and was very careful to provide for things honest in the sight of all men; so that scarcely a man had any dealings with him, that was not conscious of his uprightness. He appeared to have a sacred regard to truth in his words, both in promises and narrations, agreeable to his Resolutions. This doubtless was one reason why he was not so full of words as many are. No man feared to rely on his veracity....

His conversation with his friends was always savory and profitable: in this he was remarkable, and almost singular.— He was not wont to spend his time with them, in scandal, evil-speaking and back-biting, or in foolish jesting, idle chat and telling stories: but his mouth was that of the just, which bringeth forth wisdom, and his lips dispersed knowledge. His tongue was as the pen of a ready writer, while he conversed about important, heavenly, divine things, which his heart was so full of, in such a natural and free manner, as to be the most entertaining and instructive: so that none of his friends could enjoy his company without instruction and profit, unless it was by their own fault.

His great benevolence to mankind discovered itself, among other ways, by the uncommon regard he showed to liberality, and charity to the poor and distressed. He was much in recommending this, both in public discourses and private conversation. He often declared it to be his opinion, that professed Christians, in these days are greatly deficient in this duty; and much more so, than in most other parts of external Christianity. He often observed how much this is spoken of, recommended and encouraged in the holy Scripture, especially in the New Testament. And it was his opinion, that every particular church ought by frequent and liberal contributions, to maintain a public stock, that might be ready for the poor and necessitous members of that church: and that the principal business of deacons is to take care of the poor in the faithful and judicious distribution and improvement of the church's temporals, lodged in their hands. And he did not content himself with only recommending charity to others, but practiced it much himself; though, according to his Master's advice, he took great care to conceal his deeds of charity; by which means doubtless most of his alms-deeds will be unknown till the resurrection, which if known, would prove him to be as great an instance of charity as any that can be produced in this age. This is not mere conjecture, but is evident many ways. He was forward to give on all public occasions of charity, though when it could properly be done, he always concealed the sum given. And some instances of his giving more privately have accidentally come to the knowledge of others, in which his liberality appeared in a very extraordinary degree. One of the instances was this. Upon hearing that a poor obscure man, whom he never saw, or any of his kindred, was by an extraordinary bodily disorder, brought to great straits; he unasked, gave a considerable sum to a friend to be delivered to the distressed person; having first required a promise of him, that he would let neither the person, who was the object of his charity, nor anyone else know by whom it was given. This may serve both as an instance of his extraordinary charity and of his great care to conceal it....

He was a great enemy to young people's unseasonable company-keeping and frolicking, as he looked upon it as a great means of corrupting and ruining youth. And he thought the excuse many parents make for tolerating their children in it (viz. that it is the custom. and others' children practice it, which renders it difficult, and even impossible to restrain theirs) was insufficient and frivolous; and manifested a great degree of stupidity, on supposition the practice was hurtful and pernicious to their souls. And when some of his children grew up he found no difficulty in restraining them from this pernicious practice; but they cheerfully complied with the will of their parents herein. He allowed not his children to be from home after nine o'clock at night, when they went abroad to see their friends and companions. Neither were they allowed to sit up much after that time, in his own house, when any came to make them a visit. If any gentleman desired acquaintance with his daughters; after handsomely introducing himself, by properly consulting the parents, he was allowed all proper opportunity for it; a room and fire, if needed: but must not intrude on the proper hours of rest and sleep, or the religion and order of the family.

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## Colonial New England: An Old Order, New Awakening

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When Jonathan Edwards reached manhood in the 1720's, New England had been settled by Englishmen for a hundred years. The area was conscious of its historical roots, and Cotton Mather, the famous Puritan preacher, had produced a monumental history of New England, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702). Mather's work was intended as a religious history of the colonies, but it reports on every aspect of early New England. For the early New Englanders, religious and social history were inseparable. It was assumed since the landing of the Pilgrims in 1620 that the settlers were (or should be) Christians, and that God would bless the building up of a godly commonwealth in the new land.

Needless to say, the churches of New England were no longer persecuted sects: they had become established churches. The religious groups that settled New England left the old country because of persecution, or because they saw the Church of England as a poor model of biblical faith.

They carved out a place for themselves in the New World, with much hardship and discipline. In time the New Englanders realized that they were no longer the righteous remnant running from an apostate English church establishment. They were now an establishment.

The settlers had begun with the idea that the visible church should be identical with the invisible—that is, the gathered congregations should be bodies of true believers. Nominal Christianity is indeed unthinkable among persecuted sects. If one suffers for one's beliefs, one will either believe strongly or forsake the beliefs. But in the New World, away from persecution and adjusted to life in new territory, nominal Christianity became a reality. Mingled with devout believers were church members who merely paid lip service to Christian belief. The vision of New England as a righteous city set on a hill never died completely, but realistic observers were painfully aware that many church members gave little attention to building up the kingdom in America. They were far more interested in prospering materially in the vast land with its seemingly infinite possibilities.

This drift from spiritual to material interests is not difficult to understand. New England was basically peaceful and comfortable. Most New Englanders were farmers and made an adequate living. Industries—lumbering, fishing, shipbuilding, and others—did well, and artisans earned a good living. The disciplined work habits of the first settlers were passed down to succeeding generations, who, like their forefathers, did not depend on slavery or indentured servants. They worked hard and created an essentially middle-class society with almost no poverty. The level of education was also relatively high.

Such a society was a far cry from the mother country, where poverty, alcoholism, sexual immorality and other social ills prevailed. Yet the Puritan clergy knew that the people of New England were losing their original spiritual drive. (For more information about the Puritan vision of a Christian America, see the article by Harry Stout, "The Puritans and Edwards.")

Worldliness and religious apathy were not the only problems affecting the religious life of New England. Historians often call the seventeenth century the Age of Reason. This is more a description of the philosophical climate of Europe than of America, but the colonies were affected by the intellectual life of

Europe.

The Age of Reason was characterized by belief in man's capacities for good, especially when man acted under the guidance of reason. Many European thinkers rejected the idea of a sinful mankind living under the judgment of a wrathful God. Clergymen were affected by the new thought. Strict Calvinism gave way in many churches to religion that emphasized man's capabilities.

Of course, Puritanism still dominated New England in the 1700's. Calvinism was the ruling ideology, but was losing ground. When Jonathan Edwards attended Yale (1716–20), he came into contact with the new skepticism there. Harvard likewise entertained new ideas, so it was inevitable that the two colleges would produce some clergymen who (unlike Edwards) rejected or at least greatly modified the Calvinist theology of their forbears.

The old order was changing. Pastors and people prayed for a revival of spiritual energy. Revival came in the form of a Great Awakening, the first event in North American history to stir people of several colonies with a common religious concern.

In Jonathan Edwards' parish at Northampton, Massachusetts, awakening began in 1734. Earlier sparks of revival had appeared in New Jersey, where Theodorus Frelinghuysen and William and Gilbert Tennent were attempting to arouse people out of spiritual lethargy. And they were succeeding. Revival gathered momentum in Massachusetts and Connecticut fueled in large part by the first evangelistic tour (1740) in New England by the English preacher, George Whitefield. Throughout the colonies Whitefield brought crowds to a religious fever pitch. No speaker ever drew bigger crowds in colonial America. He made some enemies among liberal clergy, but the people loved him, and many American pastors considered him a great blessing on the colonies. Edwards along with many others stirred their own congregations to spiritual renewal and experienced revivals in the churches they visited.

The Awakening, which had receded from public prominence by 1750, has been likened in some particulars to a Second Reformation. Religion had become formal, head-centered—and dull. The outward forms of faith were there, but the reality was hollow. Many hungered for a religion with heart and soul.

The preachers of the Awakening did not abandon the typical Puritan emphasis on doctrine, but they appealed more to the emotions. This was a welcomed emphasis, as it encouraged the individual's response to a loving God. Edwards never abandoned his love of logic and reason. But he watched the Awakening carefully and concluded that true religion does indeed consist primarily of (to use his own term) *affections*.

Because of this emphasis on the individual's heartfelt response to God—an interest that Puritanism had always had, but which had diminished with time—*conversion* became important. The idea was not new in Christianity, but here it received a dramatic new emphasis. The preachers of the Awakening wanted people to know that outward morality was not enough for salvation. An inward change was necessary. An individual needed to *feel* deeply sin and unworthiness before a righteous God.

Because of the preaching of the Awakening, the sense of *religious self* intensified. The principle of individual choice became forever ingrained in American Protestantism and is still evident today among evangelicals and many others.

Not everyone was pleased with these developments. Some preachers overemphasized the physical manifestations associated with religious feelings. Persons stirred by a sermon might faint, scream, writhe, sing, or otherwise respond physically. Edwards and his colleagues taught that these symptoms might indicate a genuine conviction of sin—or, might be only an emotional response to a manipulative preacher. Edwards claimed that the physical manifestations which were not produced by the working of

God did not discredit those that were, in fact, produced by the Spirit.

But many rationalist clergymen—Charles Chauncy of Boston was the most famous—resented the enthusiasm of the Awakening. They saw it as a threat to established church authority. They felt that religious subjectivism appealed to man's lower instincts, since rational man would not need to have his beliefs substantiated by a warm heart, not to mention fainting spells, groaning, or leaping for joy. The anti-revivalist clergy—called the Old Lights—feared a breakdown of religious order and authority. The New Light clergy—those who supported the Awakening—were as aware as their opponents that something alarming was occurring—the Awakening was dividing churches. Many congregations split, and where many small towns had only one church, they now had two. Those who thought their pastor too dry or formal might, under the influence of revivalism, form a new church—and many did. The Awakening presented a choice between religious styles, church affiliations, and pastors. Religious diversity became a reality in New England, and America has continued to live—not always comfortably, but necessarily—with such diversity.

A movement of such importance needs someone to explain it and interpret it, both for his own times and for later generations. The great interpreter of the Awakening was Jonathan Edwards. Born to a devout Congregational minister in 1703 (the same year as John Wesley), Edwards produced one of the most thorough bodies of theological writing in the history of America. Precocious and pious even as a youth, Edwards took his bachelor's degree at Yale in 1720. He studied further at Yale, served as a tutor there, and briefly served as minister at a Presbyterian church in New York. In 1726 he became assistant to his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, the famous pastor of the church at Northampton, Massachusetts. Edwards married the devout and charming Sarah Pierrepont in 1727. While at Northampton—he became senior pastor at Northampton in 1729 after Stoddard's death—Edwards participated in the spiritual revival and bent his mind toward interpreting it as well.

Edwards' examination of religious psychology arose directly out of his experiences in the Northampton revivals and, later, in the Great Awakening as a whole. A letter to Boston's Benjamin Colman in 1736 (later published as a *Narrative of Surprising Conversions*) was the first in a series of works examining the nature of awakened religious experience. This letter analyzed events occurring during the local revival in Northampton (1734–35), but soon Edwards published *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (1742) to take account of the wider movement. (This work is based partly on the experiences of his devoted wife, who herself had passed through a religious crisis.) Edwards responded to charges by anti-revivalists that the revival was all emotion, froth, and disorder. He conceded that the emotionalism of the Awakening could undercut authentic Christianity, but he also defended the revival by pointing to the more intense worship and to the permanently changed lives it left in its wake.

In 1746 Edwards published his most mature examination of this subject, the *Treatise on Religious Affections*. It argues that true religion resides in the *heart*, the seat of affections, emotions, and inclinations. The book also details with painstaking scrutiny the kinds of religious emotions which are largely irrelevant to true spirituality. Edwards' careful analysis of genuine faith emphasizes that it is not the quantity of emotion which indicated the presence of true spirituality, but the origin of such emotions with God.

Edwards, shrewdly observing the revivals that were going on around him, became a religious psychologist of the first order. He is also known to posterity as a notorious preacher—not because he was a great orator, but because of a famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" preached in 1741 to a responsive congregation at Enfield, Connecticut. Edwards' vivid depiction of the agonies of those who do not plead for God's forgiveness is often given as an example of the Puritan conception of an angry, wrathful God and a vile, despicable humanity. In truth, the sermon is hardly typical of Edwards' preaching, and the parallel sermons in this issue (See "From the Archives") show that Edwards spoke as often of love as of wrath.

Edwards was indeed a Calvinist who emphasized the sovereignty of God and the inability of man to save himself. But Edwards' theology is not summarized in the Enfield sermon. Indeed, Edwards the theologian was capable of profound theological reflection. He is regarded by historians as probably the most important American theologian. (Richard Lovelace's article on Edwards' theology [See "Edwards' Theology"] shows Edwards' importance to the world of theology.) Like Edwards' works on religious experience, his theological works were rooted in the events of his lifetime. He respected the theology of John Calvin and other Reformed leaders, but he did not rely slavishly on their theology. He tried to state the case for God's sovereignty in a new age.

Edwards spent several hours each day poring over the Scriptures, theological works, and works of secular philosophers. Though diligent in his pastoral duties, he found the time for intense theological reflection. His reflection eventually led to parish troubles, which ironically resulted in his having the leisure to write his greatest theological treatise. Edwards, after much thought, decided to revoke a privilege instituted by his grandfather— the privilege of all persons who were not openly immoral to participate in the Lord's supper. Edwards decided that only converted persons should participate in the sacrament. He wrote a book *Qualifications for Communion* ( 1749) stating his case. His Northampton flock ousted him in 1750. Thereupon he became minister and missionary to Indians at Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Here on the New England frontier he produced his monumental *Freedom of the Will* (1754). In this treatise Edwards painstakingly shows that man is indeed free (a notion gaining ground as the Age of Reason progressed) but that God is still sovereign and still solely responsible for man's salvation. Edwards tries to show that a sinner—and humans, in the Calvinist tradition, come into the world under the curse of Adam—would never by himself choose to glorify God unless God himself changed that person's character. Regeneration, God's act, is the basis for repentance and conversion, the human actions.

It was obvious to Edwards that the Puritan tradition of spirituality might die unless ministers were willing to come to grips with the changing world. Edwards saw the changing philosophical climate of Europe and America, and he knew that religious thinkers had to respond to the new assumptions about human freedom and the power of reason.

He proved himself capable of dealing with the modern world, not only theoretically, but practically. He proved himself to be in many ways forward thinking. In a day when psalm-singing was almost the only music to be heard in congregational churches, Edwards encouraged the singing of new Christian hymns, notably those of Isaac Watts. (Edwards also owned a copy of the Wesleys' hymns). He advocated harmony or unison singing instead of the (now unthinkable) practice of each person singing whatever note he wished. Edwards was also innovative in Christian education, encouraging the use of different levels of instruction for different age groups. He used catechetical questioning with children, but did so in a casual, conversational style so as not to intimidate the young or to force them into the habit of giving stock answers to questions they often did not even understand. He advocated the use of story-telling as an educational tool, especially among children and youth.

Edwards' excellence as an educator and his reputation as a theologian and philosopher led to his appointment as president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton) in 1757. Shortly after he was inaugurated as president in 1758, he was inoculated for smallpox and died a few weeks afterward.

In a relatively short life he produced some of the greatest theological and philosophical writings in America's history advanced and explained the Great Awakening, and left evidence that traditional orthodox Christianity remains relevant to any age when there are creative and devout thinkers who are aware of the world around them.

Later generations have not always been kind to the memory of Jonathan Edwards. They have often

depicted him as an inhuman monster, the stereotyped hell-fire preacher notable for his fanaticism and his contempt for a detestable humanity. They have portrayed him as the essence of Puritanism at its worst—cold, inhuman, completely otherworldly, devoid of any relevance for real people in the real world. In truth, this “monster” was a devoted husband, the proud father of eleven children, and a tireless letter-writer whose favorite words seem to have been **love** and **sweetness**. He enjoyed long walks in the Massachusetts woodlands and saw all nature as an evidence of a beautiful loving creator God. He was a diligent pastor and, on occasion, an evangelist who always tempered fiery images with soothing words of the love of God for repentant sinners. He was, to all who knew him a brilliant scholar whose gifts of head combined comfortably with immense gifts of heart. Edwards was no monster and if later American religion has ever suffered from a division of heart and head, it is no fault of Edwards.

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## Jonathan Edwards: A Gallery of Friends, Foes & Followers

### George Whitefield (1714–1770)

George Whitefield was a famous friend of Edwards. While American revivalists such as Edwards and Gilbert Tennent limited their activities to relatively small areas, Whitefield enlarged the Awakening into an intercolonial, interdenominational effort aimed at restoring spiritual energy to churches. Whitefield, an Anglican priest, was a fiery preacher and could move vast audiences with his intensely dramatic sermons. The great English actor David Garrick claimed he would give a hundred guineas just to be able to say the word "Oh" the way Whitefield did. Practical-minded Benjamin Franklin came to hear a Whitefield sermon and ended up emptying his purse to help fund a charity Whitefield sponsored. Both the poor and the privileged turned out to hear this orator, whose popularity was unparalleled in the century. However, because many churches were closed to him as they were to his friend and advisor John Wesley, Whitefield often took to preaching in open fields, barns, or courthouses on both sides of the Atlantic. He journeyed to America seven times and impacted colonial society from New Hampshire to Georgia. So great was his popularity in America that, like Edwards Whitefield was criticized by many clergymen who resented the emotionalism and occasional disorders. Charles Chauncy was one of the most vocal critics of both Edwards and Whitefield. Edwards himself was deeply impressed by Whitefield's presence, and when Whitefield preached in Edwards' church Edwards wept during most of the service. While Whitefield was no match for Edwards' skill as a theologian and thinker, his zeal and genuine piety left their mark on Edwards and on the Great Awakening. Without Whitefield the amazing phenomena of 1740–41 might never have come to pass.

### Solomon Stoddard (1643–1729)

Even if Solomon Stoddard had not been the grandfather of Jonathan Edwards, he would have a place in the history of Christianity in America. The greatnephew of Massachusetts Governor John Winthrop, Stoddard graduated from Harvard in 1662 and became the college's first librarian. He went to Northampton in 1669. In the Northampton church he faced an issue that before and after his time caused commotion in New England churches: Should persons who show no evidence of spiritual regeneration be admitted to the Lord's Supper? Young Stoddard began to urge a relaxation of membership requirements, and finally concluded that open admission to the Lord's Supper was justified. Convinced that man was unregenerate and depraved by nature, Stoddard insisted that it was unfair to require proof of conversion. He opened the sacraments to persons of every spiritual state except those living openly scandalous lives. The practice became known as Stoddardeanism and was generally adopted throughout all western Massachusetts. Stoddard became the supreme ecclesiastical politician in the area and was known as "the Pope" in Northampton. The awed Indians referred to him as the "White Man's God." He was loved and admired by his parishioners, who seemed pleased that he preached hell-fire and damnation. He railed against drunkenness and adultery and worked the people up into frenzies of religious excitement. He led awakenings in Northampton years before his famous grandson was even born. In 1726 Edwards was called to Northampton to serve as assistant pastor to Stoddard who died in 1729. When Edwards tried to abolish his grandfather's policy of open Communion years later, the Northampton parish asked for his resignation.

### Charles Chauncy (1705–1787)

was Edwards' most notable foe. After Edwards wrote *Some Thoughts Concerning The Present*

***Revival of Religion in New England***, Charles Chauncy of Boston responded with ***Some Seasonal Thoughts on the State of Religion***. A rationalist, Chauncy held that man's religion should be governed by enlightened reason, not by the emotions. Thus he ridiculed the emotion generated by the preaching of Edwards, Whitefield, and others involved in the Awakening. (Curiously, Chauncy, like many other clergymen, was initially interested in the revival movement, but he failed in his few attempts at revival preaching and afterwards held the whole movement in contempt.) Like many of his contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic, Chauncy was interested in revising religion to make it congruent with optimism about human ability. During his sixty years as pastor of Boston's prestigious First Church he helped shape a liberal theology giving reason the highest place in religious life. For Chauncy, reason and order, symbolized in the church ordinances, were more important than a stress on personal faith and assurance. Besides deriding the emotionalism of the Awakening, Chauncy also came to criticize the whole Calvinistic notion of election. He came to reject the idea of eternal damnation and concluded that after death the wicked would only be punished for a time proportionate to their sin. While the revivalists worked to encourage conversion in their listeners, Chauncy insisted that orderly Christian habits would ultimately fit persons for happy immortality.

### **Eleazar Wheelock (1711–1779)**

was a friend and fellow evangelist. When a group of five ministers descended on Enfield, Connecticut, to start a religious revival there, two of the five men were Jonathan Edwards and Eleazar Wheelock. Like Edwards, Wheelock was often away from his home parish, being invited by other New England pastors to help awaken their congregations out of spiritual lethargy. Wheelock traveled extensively and was a leading figure in the Awakening. Perhaps his most lasting influence lies, however, in the field of education, not evangelism. Wheelock began a charity school designed to drill Indians in the rudiments of religion and send them back to their native cultures as agents of the Christian church. His star pupil, Samson Occom, was evidence that Indians could indeed become civilized and even scholarly Christians. In 1769 Wheelock obtained a charter for the school, which he named Dartmouth College. Dartmouth opened its doors to whites as well as Indians. The institution survived hard times including the disruptions caused by the American revolution. Wheelock, a skilled administrator, helped see the school through hard times and saw it arise as a supplier of preachers for the northeast frontier.

### **Gilbert Tennent (1703–1764)**

was a friend and fellow minister. The son of the famous pastor and theologian William Tennent, Gilbert studied theology and took pastorates in Delaware and New Jersey. While pastoring in New Brunswick, New Jersey, he came under the influence of Theodorus Frelinghuysen, a Dutch Reformed pastor who was already leading revivals in the area. By 1729 Tennent was involved in the revival movement, working by means of personal counseling and pulpit addresses. In 1740 George Whitefield asked Tennent to visit New England to continue the revival started by Whitefield and others. While preaching there, Tennent, like others in the Awakening, tried to convince listeners of their need for regeneration and for something more intense than merely formal religion. However, lacking Whitefield's oratorical gifts and the more restrained persuasiveness of Edwards, Tennent shouted, raged, stomped, and set listeners' nerves on edge with his hellfire sermons. Though he preached with the same purpose as Whitefield and Edwards, he focused in his sermons almost exclusively on hellfire and damnation, setting a pattern for some later evangelists in America. He was severely criticized by many of the less revival-oriented clergy, and he in turn criticized them for their spiritual lethargy. Along with Edwards and Whitefield, Tennent set the tone for the Awakening and for the whole pattern of evangelism in America.

### **Samuel Hopkins (1721–1803)**

was Edward's most famous follower. If Jonathan Edwards can be said to have had a theological successor,

Samuel Hopkins was that successor. Hopkins came from Yale in 1741 seeking for spiritual help. Later, when Hopkins was serving his first pastorate in Housatonic, Massachusetts, he became a loyal friend and disciple of Edwards. A more sedentary man than his renowned teacher, Hopkins became the systematizer of Edwards' theological genius. Never known for his ability as a preacher, Hopkins applied his theological mind to Edward's Calvinism and created a system now known as the New Divinity movement. Hopkins made his modified Calvinism a weapon of defense against Arminian critics who gave more freedom to human will in their system. Hopkins' theology lacked the feeling of heartfelt adoration and devotion that permeates Edwards' best work, but Hopkins was largely responsible for passing on Edwards' theology to a new generation of ministers. He also produced the first biography of his friend and mentor providing us with numerous details about the Edwards family life that we might otherwise lack.

### **Isaac Watts (1674–1748)**

Hymn-writer and pastor of a Dissenting church in London, Watts also found time to comment on religious happenings in the English colonies. Hearing of the Northampton revival led by Edwards in 1734–35, Watts wanted to know more. He perceived the "wonderful work of God" in the revivals of America. After Edwards delivered the address "The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God" at the Yale commencement in 1741, Watts sponsored the London publication of this brilliant defense of the Great Awakening. Later, however, he came to criticize the Awakening for some of the emotional excesses and disorder engendered by the evangelists. He also expressed some concern that some of the preachers—including Jonathan Edwards—spoke in their sermons of the American colonies as the new arena for God's kingdom thus implying that the mother country was spiritually dead. While the Awakening was shaking the colonies. Isaac Watts made his own lasting contribution to Christianity by producing some six hundred hymns, some of which are among the finest in the language. Breaking the stranglehold of psalm-singing on English hymnody, Watts produced beautiful scripturally-based hymns that revolutionized public worship in England and America. "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," "O God Our Help in Ages Past," "I Sing the Almighty Power of God," and "Joy to the World" are only a few of his great hymns. Edwards encouraged the singing of Watt's hymns in churches.

### **Ezra Stiles (1727–1795)**

Ezra's father Isaac was one of Edwards' peers at Yale, but unlike Edwards, the older Stiles was generally opposed to the Great Awakening. He did not pass on his antipathy to his son, who looked more favorably on the Awakening and its aftermath. Ezra became a kind of chronicler of his age, making many astute observations that have helped historians view the period more accurately. During his lifetime he was recognized as the most learned man in New England. He studied widely in many fields and was alert to new ideas in the sciences and in theology. He was a kind of enlightened liberal, though he did not support the Old Light Calvinists in their attack on revivalism. In an age of much bitter quarreling among church groups, Stiles adopted a moderating position, hoping that religious truth would benefit from a free exchange of doctrinal opinions. From 1778 to 1795 he served as president of Yale, where he also taught church history. As president of Yale he contributed significantly to religious training in Connecticut and beyond.

### **David Brainerd (1718–1747)**

was a friend and, almost, a family member of Edwards. He died at the home of Edwards, being nursed during his waning months by Jerusha, his fiancée and one of Jonathan Edwards' daughters. During his short life he espoused the cause of the Great Awakening. His unfavorable comparisons between the zealous work of Edwards and the sedateness of the clergymen at Yale caused him to be expelled from that institution. His zeal to spread the gospel was unaffected, and he found an opportunity in 1742, when the Society in Scotland for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge commissioned him to work among Indians in New York and, later, Pennsylvania. Brainerd traveled over 3000 miles on horseback. A genuine revival

occurred among the Indians in New Jersey, though Brainerd was dogged throughout his ministry by poor health. He left to posterity his diary, which has become a devotional classic. Jonathan Edwards published his friend's diary and added a short biography. He saw Brainerd as an example of selfless Puritan virtue. Brainerd would probably be forgotten today if Edwards had not helped make his name a byword for missionary zeal.

### **Timothy Dwight (1752–1817)**

the grandson of Edwards, succeeded Ezra Stiles as president of Yale. Renowned as a teacher, preacher, poet, and hymn-writer, Dwight set high goals for Yale, working to raise academic standards and increase the spiritual vitality of the college. He preached to students twice on Sundays and saw himself as pastor to the school. His discourses on religion helped bring about a campus revival, convincing many students to adopt orthodox beliefs and join the ranks of learned Calvinists. Dwight also waged a bold campaign against the deism and rationalism of such writers as Thomas Paine. He proved himself an able defender of traditional theology. Even so, Dwight did not conform strictly to the ideas of his famous grandfather. Rather, he occupied a mediating position between the New Divinity and Old Calvinism. His chapel sermons, expressing a modified Edwardsean theology, were published after his death as ***Theology Explained and Defended***. Like Edwards, he stoutly defended orthodox Christianity, a great task in an age of skepticism and rationalism. He is perhaps best remembered as the author of the hymn "I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord."

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## My Dear Companion

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**The real Jonathan Edwards, the man, the person, was a tender husband, an effective and affectionate father, a human being quite unlike the image of him as the stern preacher of sermons about sin. His happy marriage to Sarah Pierrepont was more than a loving link between two people: it was Edwards' link to life—to the practical; to warm fireplaces, good food, attractive surroundings; to devotion, to the dailyness of the Incarnation. What Edwards described as their "uncommon union" bonded them marvelously to one another and it also bonded them to the living God.**

They met in 1723 in New Haven, Connecticut, when Edwards was twenty years old, a graduate student and tutor at Yale. Sarah was then thirteen years old, and she was the daughter of James Pierrepont, the mighty minister of the New Haven church. One of her great-grandfathers had been Thomas Hooker, and another had been the first mayor of New York City. Hers was an impeccable social background and Sarah's burnished manners matched her breeding. When the gawky Edwards first met Sarah, he scared her. Unusually tall, in an era when men tended to be short of stature; abstemious in a society of jolly drinkers: intense and studious, Edwards made an awkward beau. Looking on as Sarah would shine in social situations, Edwards would be conscious of his own shortcomings, and would go home to admonish himself in his journal with such entries as "Have lately erred, in not allowing time enough for conversation." When he went home to East Windsor, Connecticut, at the end of the school term, he was supposed to be studying for his M.A. degree. He had a great deal of studying to do, but the usually focused Edwards found that his mind was wandering. In the front page of a Greek grammar, he wrote this famous digression:

They say there is a young lady in New Haven .... She has a strange sweetness in her mind, and singular purity in her affections; is most just and conscientious in all her conduct; and you could not persuade her to do anything wrong or sinful if you would give her all the world ... She is of wonderful sweetness, calmness and universal benevolence of mind ....

She will sometimes go about from place to place, singing sweetly and seems always to be full of joy and pleasure; and no one knows for what.

Edwards' journal for the next four years reveals the ups and downs of an introspective young man in love. "If I had more of an air of gentleness, I should be much mended," he once rebuked himself. In 1725, Yale went through a turbulent reorganization which caused much stress on its overworked tutors. Edwards' journal entries became distraught:

***Dec. 29 Dull and lifeless.***

***Jan. 9 Decayed***

***Jan. 10 Recovering.***

The body's wisdom finally intervened and sent Edwards to bed with pleurisy. He had the rest he needed. Mending began.

Jonathan and Sarah married on July 28, 1727. Sarah wore a bright green satin brocade dress. The exuberant design reflected the Puritan view of love. To call persons "puritanical" when we speak of alienation from the flesh is to be imprecise. Some Victorians may have had negative feelings about the human body, but most Puritans celebrated it. They loved robustly and gave marriage an honored place in their social order. America was still young and the whole society needed the stability of the family to give stability to the community. Everyone rejoiced in the establishment of a new household. Wives were protected well by law. For instance, a man could be punished for using "harsh words" to his wife.

The Edwards union was undergirded by the social order and given depth and complexity by the characters of the remarkable people involved. It is no coincidence that one of the words Edwards used most often was "sweetness," and that one of his most melting sermons was preached on Genesis 2:21-25 ("when Adam rose from his deep sleep God brought woman to him from near his heart").

The Edwardses moved to the attractive Connecticut River valley town of Northampton, Massachusetts, and began their lives together. The Reverend Samuel Hopkins who lived in the Edwards house as an apprentice preacher has given us an indispensable memoir of them. He assures us "no person of discernment could be conversant in the family without observing and admiring the perfect harmony and mutual love and esteem that subsisted between them." It was Edwards' good fortune, and an example of his brilliance, to choose a mate who perfectly supplemented and complemented him. He was stiff, Sarah was socially adept. He was intellectual and abstracted, Sarah the one who remembered when firewood had to be brought in and the garden hoed. Hopkins again:

While she uniformly paid a becoming deference to her husband and treated him with entire respect, she spared no pains in conforming to his inclination and rendering everything in the family agreeable and pleasant.

Though she gave so much to this relationship, Sarah gained much. Her husband treated her as a fully valuable person whose conversation entertained him, whose spirit nourished his own spiritual life, and whose presence gave him repose.

One of their customs was to go out together in the late afternoon for horseback rides. Clipping along a leafy woodland trail, they could talk without interruption and Sarah would not be distracted by the sight of dust on a mantle or by other household duties. Sarah was always welcome to slip upstairs to Jonathan's study if she wished to speak to him. They had devotions together the last thing at night, before retiring to sleep. Edwards spoke out of experience when he wrote "Heaven is a world of love."

Their eleven children have been a gift to American cultural history. In 1900 a reporter tracked down 1,400 descendants of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards. He found that they included 13 college presidents, 65 professors, two graduate school deans, 100 lawyers, 66 physicians, 80 holders of public office, including three senators and three governors of states. Members of this clan had written 135 published books, and the women were repeatedly described as "great readers" or "highly intelligent." These people seem also to have had a talent for making money: their numbers included a roster of bankers and industrialists. Of course there were platoons of missionaries. The report asserted: "The family has cost the country nothing in pauperism, in crime, in hospital or asylum service: on the contrary, it represents the highest usefulness."

It was extraordinary that all eleven Edwards babies lived. At that time, infant mortality was high.

The survival of the small Edwardses in that precarious era says something about Sarah's instinctive sense of nutrition, her clean house, her good health during pregnancy, and about the remarkable eugenic combination this couple represented.

Edwards had the habit of taking one child along with him when he had to journey out of town. (Thanks to the anecdote told by one daughter, we have the story of the time Edwards was delayed in arriving at a speaking engagement in New Hampshire. When he finally turned up, the flustered presiding officer greeted him with this statement: "They say your wife is going to heaven by a shorter road than yourself.")

Another of Edwards' fatherly strategies was to give his full attention to the children for one hour before dinner each evening. He would sit in his high-backed chair, without his awesome wig, smoking the clay pipe which was his one public vice. This was the hour when the children knew they could ask their father to help with their school lessons, or could report problems or adventures that had come about during the day.

Jonathan and Sarah approached the discipline of their brood as a united team. The children noted this, and also saw that their father treated their mother with courtesy and respect. In one sermon about Christian nurture, Edwards proclaimed "There is such a thing as anger that is consistent with good will," and he practiced what he preached. He also once said "Every house should be a little church," and that, too, he made real.

In the Great Awakening the house hummed with activity, as parishioners clamored for counsel, and visitors came from many places to see what all the excitement was about. Among the many house guests in that period was the evangelist George Whitefield who went away saying "A sweeter couple I have not seen." Edwards felt a bidding to spread news of a phenomenon he believed to be "the surprising work of God." Thus, in addition to his greatly accelerated parish duties, he accepted a heavy schedule of out-of-town meetings.

Here we come to a part of our narrative so unlike anything else in our story that it seems out of place. We do not know what to make of this, but precisely because it was so unusual yet so intractably on the record, we must mention it. In January 1742, after fourteen years of marriage, Sarah Edwards experienced an intense spiritual crisis, brought on by the preaching of visiting minister Samuel Buell. While Edwards was away on a speaking trip, she toppled into episodes of fainting, visions, and religious ecstasy. Neighbors came in and kept the house going, and when Edwards returned, he found the town buzzing about the behavior of his wife. She assured him that she had an assurance of God's favor she had not had before.

He sat down with Sarah and asked her to tell him everything she could remember about the weeks just past. Using a shorthand he had invented, he took down her story in full. According to Sarah, she had experienced the most intense feelings of spiritual joy and assurance. Edwards was convinced that his wife's experience was a spiritual crisis to be attributed to the workings of God. The psychologist William James has been fascinated by this event as one variety of religious experience. Both James and Edwards concur that an unmistakable sequel of this episode was Sarah's consequent "good disposition." She went back to making jam and hemming pillow cases and rocking babies to sleep, as she always had, but her husband tells us "she did all as the service of love, and so doing it with a continual, uninterrupted cheerfulness, peace and joy." Avoiding any specific mention of his wife's name, Edwards included her story in ***Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England***.

Edwards' dismissal from the church in Northampton was a troublesome time for the family. After lean months of unemployment, Edwards found an unlikely assignment. He and his family moved to

the remote town of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, then on the edge of the forested frontier. The mighty philosopher's new congregation was a tribe of Indians, who came to church wearing bear grease to fend off insects. However, the physical setting was beautiful and the Indians were friendly. The quiet made possible the writing of *Freedom of the Will*. Each evening, Edwards would read to Sarah, "my dear companion," the product of the day's toil at his desk. Years went on. Children married. One daughter moved to New Jersey where her attractive and brilliant husband was organizing a new university at Princeton. Suddenly, in 1757, the young college president died. The trustees invited Edwards to succeed his son-in-law as president of Princeton. When the official invitation came, Edwards astonished everyone by bursting into tears, "which was very unusual for him in the presence of others."

Edwards went on to Princeton to be with his widowed daughter, while Sarah stayed behind in Stockbridge to finish the packing. A smallpox epidemic struck that spring of 1758. Vaccination was then a new and controversial intervention. Always ahead of his time, Edwards, characteristically, chose to take a chance on the vaccination. As he lay dying from complications that followed the risky procedure, he spoke in a low voice. The doctor and two daughters of the Edwards leaned down to hear the last words of Jonathan Edwards. He spoke of Sarah:

Give my kindest love to my dear wife, and tell her that the uncommon union which has so long subsisted between us has been of such a nature as I trust is spiritual and therefore will continue forever.

Jonathan's last words suggest the scripture passage that was Sarah's favorite, Romans 8:35: "Who, then, can separate us from the love of Christ?"

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Edwards' Theology

### Puritanism Meets a New Age

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**Jonathan Edwards may be the greatest American theologian and philosopher—and perhaps also the greatest mind—America has yet produced. Edwards' theological genius lay in his ability to summarize effectively the main thrusts of the Reformation and Puritanism and yet not merely to reiterate these, but to apply them to crucial problems in his own century.**

Edwards' theology is rooted in Calvinism. Many of his major works are simply consistent applications of Calvin's teaching on God's grace and sovereignty. Edwards is undoubtedly the most powerful theologian writing in the Reformed tradition before the twentieth century.

But the sources of his thinking range far beyond Calvinism. He was influenced by various currents of thought in the seventeenth century. Some of these, like Cambridge Platonism and the philosophy of John Locke, utterly contradict one another, and seem far removed from Reformation thought. And Edwards' theology makes considerable use of reason and natural theology. But above all else Edwards was nurtured by Puritan spiritual theology. In many ways, he is the Johann Sebastian Bach of Puritanism, perfecting and summarizing this movement's emphasis on Christian experience at a time when it was out of fashion.

### Confronting a Dead Orthodoxy

Edwards applied his theological synthesis in confronting two critical problems in the eighteenth century. One of these crises was internal: the loss of spiritual power within the Puritan renewal movement. Another crisis lay both within the church and around it: the developing climate of humanistic rationalism, the secular drift of Western culture. Edwards' great achievement was the creation of a theology which confronted both of these crises head-on, opposing a humanist Enlightenment in society with an evangelical awakening in the church.

Edwards' theology was forged in the flames of the Awakening. When he took over his grandfather's congregation in Northampton, he found it in a condition of sleepwalking formalism, typical of New England's spiritual decline. From 1650 on, the Puritan laity had been drifting away from "the power of godliness" which had characterized the first generation. They could still give correct answers to the catechism, but their hearts were fixed not on God, but on land and trade.

Edwards' remedy for the church was aimed at a form of the same disease that was assaulting the culture: the darkening and disabling of the mind through indwelling sin. This affliction was invisible to the intellectual leaders of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They had pinned all their hopes on the powers of human reason set free from superstition, and had thus compounded the problem by relying on the darkened mind for light.

The Puritans had applied Luther's and Calvin's understanding of total depravity to the religious understanding. They were dissatisfied even with Calvinist orthodoxy if it was merely "notional" in character—that is, simply the product of learning or conditioning. For the Puritans, orthodox doctrine had to be

accompanied by repentance personal trust in Christ, and the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit awakening and illuminating the heart. Head and heart were expected to function together in the Spirit-led life.

Edwards' development of Calvin's emphasis on the work of the Spirit was simply the summation of the Puritan attack on dead orthodoxy. In stressing the need for the illumination of biblical truth by "a divine and supernatural light," Edwards used John Locke's philosophy of mind more as a storehouse of convenient metaphors than as a theological source. He would not have attributed the awakening impact of his sermons to any rhetoric of sensation, but to the Spirit's penetration beneath the surface convictions of human reason to awaken "a sense of the heart" focused on the glory of the divine nature and the excellence of Christ.

## **Confronting the Enlightenment**

Edwards' religious psychology was enriched by the Puritan emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, but it was also set against the oversimplified categories of Enlightenment psychology. He opposed the effort to divide human nature into separate compartments of mind, will, and emotion, and insisted that all of these faculties are rooted in the **heart**, the center of human personality. Thus he believed that what we think is inevitably the product of the set of our wills, and that this in turn results from the basic direction of our hearts' desires.

Edwards took for granted that all our actions spring from our desires. Either we delight in the living God and seek to serve and obey him, or we are captive to desires which are set on lesser goods. His great work on **Freedom of the Will** is thus not an abstract Calvinist treatise. It is a grappling with the concept that we are free to do whatever we want, but that we will never want to do God's will without a vision of his divine nature imparted by the Spirit

English rationalists had tried to build an ethical system rooted in self-interest. Adam Smith's economics expresses this approach: individual self-interest can be pursued with a clear conscience because it tends inevitably toward the good of the whole. But Edwards insists that true virtue can only arise out of a heart which has been spiritually transformed so that it sees God, and seeks his will and the public good rather than private interests.

Apart from this regenerating vision, Edwards sees human nature trapped in its own semi-conscious rebellion against God, expressing hatred toward him in every act. Enlightenment rationalists thought they were conducting a disinterested search for truth. Edwards told them they were evading the real God by choosing to believe in a more manageable deity.

In a comparatively few sermons, he used the rhetoric of hellfire, which Puritans shared with the Counter-Reformation, to drive home the sense of guilt, and give a compassionate call to repentance. But this was not a prevailing theme in Edwards' theology, since he spoke more of God's love than of the fires of hell. We only remember "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" because it is such a good example of its genre, and because it was useful to later critics who wanted to "defend" humanity from Puritanism.

## **A God-Centered Universe**

The themes which Edwards prefers to develop are those connected with God's glory and his grace. Edwards' universe, like his theology, is relentlessly God-centered. All things proceed from the infinite God, glorious in his divine beauty and excellence. God's love is poured out on his creation, and yet his own worth is so immeasurably great that his object in creating the world can only have been to exhibit his glory. All theories of salvation which call attention to human works (Roman Catholicism) or human ability (Arminian Protestantism) only detract from the grandeur of his love revealed to us in Jesus Christ, and made real in our hearts only by the illumination of the Spirit.

Enlightenment rationalism had sought to disconnect the world from God's immediate control. Edwards had learned much from the scientific genius of Isaac Newton, but his theology was a radical attack on the clockwork universe, governed by immanent natural laws, which Newtonian physics seemed to postulate.

The philosophical framework Edwards adopted for this theological attack was a form of **panentheism** (the concept that all creation has no independent existence from God, but is sustained as an emanation from his being). Today most Christians still think in terms of a universe which God has set in motion and placed under the control of inherent natural laws, although it is still believed that God may intervene and upset those laws if he chooses to work a miracle. Edwards, on the other hand, believed that God's providence was literally the binding force of atoms—that the universe would collapse and disappear unless God sustained its existence from one moment to the next. For Edwards, the world has no momentum which can sustain it apart from God, and he is in immediate control of every event from moment to moment.

With this view of the universe, Edwards was, in a sense, ahead of his time. His view seems to anticipate the post-Newtonian physics of the twentieth century, in which all matter is ultimately seen in terms of interacting fields of energy, and the forces governing these are rather mysterious. But as usual, Edwards' view was grounded in Scripture, which affirms that Christ is "upholding all things by his word of power" (Heb. 1:3, RSV), and that "in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17). Edwards' thinking, like his universe was relentlessly God-centered.

Edwards' theology was also, being in the Reformation tradition, centered on Christ. He has given us matchless statements on the work of Christ ("Justification by Faith") and on his person ("The Excellency of Christ"). Examining the passage in Revelation 5 in which Christ is presented first as a lion and then as a lamb, Edwards develops the thesis that "There is an admirable conjunction of diverse excellencies in Jesus Christ." This conjunction is dialectical in character: Christ combines infinite glory and greatest humility, majesty and meekness, obedience and dominion, sovereignty and resignation, self-sufficiency and trust in God. The resulting sermon, as Edwards' biographer Perry Miller has said, is a theological masterpiece.

Though Edwards did not produce any summary work of systematic theology, he was surely a systematic thinker. In his notebooks we can trace the growth of his major themes over years of thought, and even specific works like ***Freedom of the Will*** and ***God's Chief End in Creating the World***. Edwards seems to have felt that his whole literary production would ultimately fit together in a summa which he called "A Rational Account of the Main Doctrines of the Christian Religion," which would be designed to show "how all arts and sciences, the more they are perfected, the more they issue in divinity."

## Theology and Awakening

The strength of Edwards' theology was that it responded to contemporary occasions of crisis, rather than simply reiterating a party line adopted in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. Edwards was delighted when the Great Awakening in America seemed to be producing a renaissance of Christian experience. When the Awakening developed problems, however, he became a relentless critic, warning against extremes of emotion and sensationalism.

He began by explaining and defending the Awakening—first in ***A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God***, which reported what happened in his congregation in 1734, and later in ***Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*** (1741). In ***Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*** (1742), however, he gave equal space to a critique of spiritual pride and theological aberrations which had developed during the revival. Finally, in the ***Treatise on Religious Affections*** (1746) he focused on one of the oldest Puritan themes—the distinction between "common grace" experiences of the unregenerate and true conversion. In the treatise he set out a rigorous

analysis of the differences between carnal religiosity, which evokes a great deal of commotion, and true spirituality, which touches the heart with the vision of God's excellence, and frees it from self-centeredness. In all these works Edwards defended the role of the emotions in the life of faith. While Charles Chauncy and other liberal critics sneered at the intense emotions generated by the Awakening, Edwards affirmed again and again that reason and emotion both have their place in the Christian life. Edwards admitted that the Awakening had produced some bizarre experiences, but insisted that these did not discredit revivalism or an intensely felt piety.

During the course of the Awakening, Edwards developed the distinctive eschatological outlook which motivated and directed American evangelicalism for the century. Up to this point, American Puritans had preferred classical premillennialism to the amillennial outlook of the Reformers. Sensing the profound impact spiritual awakening made on the church, and could make on a society, Edwards became convinced that the postmillennial outlook of Daniel Whitby was true to Scripture. His view of the future is set out in the sermons on "The History of Redemption," and in the "Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement," which sought to promote concerted prayer for worldwide spiritual awakening.

The future Edwards was aiming toward was one in which the entire visible church was spiritually renewed and unified, while all false Christianity (both Romanism and Protestant rationalism) was overthrown. The result of this awakening in the church would be a transformed culture, and "universal peace and a good understanding among the nations of the world ... united in one amiable society." Movement toward this goal would not be instantaneous; it would come in a long series of alternating declines and outpourings of the Spirit, energizing the church for new assaults on the powers of darkness, until these were cast down, and all the earth was "filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord" (Hab. 2:14 RSV). Those who believed strongly in this goal, like Samuel Hopkins, Timothy Dwight, Lyman Beecher, and Charles Finney, were strongly motivated to attack cultural evil and unify the church to evangelize and transform society.

### **Losing the Vision**

American evangelicalism abandoned these goals at the end of the nineteenth century, opting for a pessimistic image of the future. Only the Social Gospel retained the Edwardsean vision in a secularized form, forgetting Edwards' clear vision of the depth and power of evil, which could only be attenuated by an extraordinary presence of the Spirit. In America in the twentieth century, both evangelicals and liberals have expected ordinary graces and aimed at pedestrian goals.

Today a later generation is finding new relevance in Edwards' vision of the scope of Christian mission. Once again we are being called to "explicit union in extraordinary prayer for spiritual awakening and world evangelization" (to quote the 1984 Lausanne Prayer Conference's citation of Edwards). At such a time, we can hope that Christian activists will read Edwards to see the depth of spiritual renewal he expected as a prerequisite for transforming the church and the surrounding culture. And we can hope that they will also catch the vision of a theology which offers radical opposition to the basic principles of secular thought.

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Jonathan Edward's World: Christian History Timeline

Edwards lived in an era of dramatic social and intellectual change. Technological advances in manufacturing changed social life, especially in England. Enlightenment thought was beginning to influence the theology of America, emphasizing reason and slighting the traditional Christian view of man's nature. Deism was popular among intellectuals in Europe and America, and some thinkers were ready to dispense with the supernatural altogether. However, working within a framework of biblical faith, Edwards did not reach the conclusion—as many persons did—that man's reason would lead him to do the good.

Edwards worked creatively within the Calvinist tradition, believing that a return to orthodoxy would result in a great revival in America. Faced on the one hand with the rising tide of rationalism and on the other hand with religious revivals that often dispensed with reason altogether, Edwards tried to steer a middle course and maintain a balance of reason and emotion, head and heart in the Christian life.

### Jonathan Edwards

**1703** Jonathan Edwards born in East Windsor, Connecticut

**1716** Admitted to Yale

**1720** Graduates from Yale and studies there for the ministry

**1722** Serves as pastor of a New York Presbyterian church for eight months

**1724** Elected a tutor at Yale

**1726** Called to Northampton church as assistant minister to grandfather Solomon Stoddard.

**1727** Marriage to Sarah Pierrepont

**1729** Death of Solomon Stoddard

**1731** Delivers Public Lecture at First Church, Boston

**1734** Beginning of Great Awakening in Northampton

**1740** Whitefield briefly joins Edwards in revival preaching

**1741** Preaches sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" at Enfield

**1742** Writes *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion*

**1746** Writes *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*

- 1747** Death of David Brainerd at Edwards' home
- 1748** Beginning of dissension in Edwards' church
- 1750** Farewell Sermon at Northampton
- 1751** Settles in Stockbridge as pastor to settlers and missionary to Indians
- 1754** Writes *Freedom of the Will*
- 1755** Writes *Nature of True Virtue*
- 1757** Chosen president of College of New Jersey (Princeton)
- 1758** Inaugurated president at Princeton
- 1758** Dies of smallpox March 22

### **World Events**

- 1701** Thomas Bray, representative of Bishop of London, organizes Society for Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts;
- 1701** Collegiate School (later called Yale) founded
- 1702** Anne Queen of England (to 1714) Queen Anne's War (colonial phase of War of Spanish Succession, concluded by Treaty of Utrecht, 1713)
- 1702** Cotton Mather writes *Magnalia Christi Americana*, ecclesiastical history of New England
- 1703** John Wesley born
- 1704** Death of English philosopher John Locke, a major influence on Edwards Weekly Review, first American newspaper, published in Boston
- 1707** Act of Union unites England and Scotland under name Great Britain
- 1707** Isaac Watts' *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* alters course of English hymnody
- 1709** First mass emigration of Germans to America (Pennsylvania)
- 1709** Piano invented
- 1710** Bishop George Berkeley's *Principles of Human Knowledge*
- 1711** Steele and Addison publish *The Spectator*, gentleman's newspaper with commentary on news, literature, and art

- 1712** Last execution for witchcraft in England
- 1712** Newcomen steam pump, new aid to coal mining
- 1713** Treaty of Utrecht ends War of Spanish Succession
- 1714** German philosopher Leibniz' *Monadology*, a rebuttal to mechanistic views of man
- 1714** George I, first Hanoverian King of England (to 1727)
- 1715** Death of Louis XIV of France. Succeeded by great-grandson
- 1717** Inoculation against smallpox introduced into England by Lady Mary Wortley Montague
- 1719** Protestant dissenters tolerated in Ireland
- 1719** Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*
- 1721** Czar Peter the Great of Russia subordinates church to state, replaces Patriarch with Holy Synod
- 1721** Robert Walpole is Britain's first Prime Minister (to 1742)
- 1722** Herrnhut founded as Moravian settlement in Saxony by Count von Zinzendorf
- 1723** Christianity banned in China
- 1723** Death of architect Christopher Wren, designer of St. Paul's cathedral
- 1726** Gilbert Tennent leads revival in New Jersey
- 1726** Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*
- 1727** Death of Isaac Newton, whose work Edwards admired
- 1727** George II King of England (to 1760)
- 1729** North and South Carolina created as crown colonies
- 1731** Expulsion of Protestants from Salzburg. Many emigrate to America
- 1732** Birth of George Washington
- 1732** Georgia established as colony under James Oglethorpe
- 1732** First edition of *Poor Richard's Almanack* published by Benjamin Franklin
- 1733** J.S. Bach's B-Minor Mass

1733 John Kay invents flying shuttle used in textile mills

1735 Linnaeus' ***Systema Naturae***, outlining his system of taxonomy of plants

1735 Freedom of the press established in New England by Zenger case

1736 Witchcraft statutes repealed in England

1736 Joseph Butler's ***Analogy of Religion*** written as rebuttal to Deism

1738 John Wesley's Aldersgate experience, leading to the Methodist Revival

1739 War of Jenkins' Ear between England and Spain (to 1742)

1740 Frederick the Great reigns as King of Prussia (to 1786)

1740 Samuel Richardson's ***Pamela***, sometimes regarded as first modern English novel

1741 American Presbyterians split over issue of revivalism

1742 First performance of Handel's ***Messiah***

1742 Jews expelled from Russia

1744 First Methodist General Conference

1744 King George's War (colonial phase of War of Austrian Succession, ended in 1748)

1744 Painter and engraver William Hogarth's illustrations for ***Marriage a la Mode***

1746 College of New Jersey (Princeton) founded

1747 Actor David Garrick becomes manager of Drury Lane Theatre

1747 Samuel Johnson begins publication of his ***Dictionary of the English Language***

1748 Montesquieu's ***Spirit of Laws***

1749 Henry Fielding's ***Tom Jones***

1751 Currency Act restricts issuance of paper money in New England

1751 First volume of ***French Encyclopedia***, published as a monument to reason

1754 French and Indian War (to 1763)

1755 David Hume's ***Natural History of Religion***, denying supernaturalism in religion

**1755** Lisbon earthquake kills 30,000 people

**1756** Birth of Mozart

**1759** Quebec falls to the British

**1759** Voltaire's ***Candide***

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 8: Jonathan Edwards & the Great Awakening

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## The Puritans and Edwards The American Vision of a Covenant People

HARRY S. STOUT Harry S. Stout is associate professor of history at the University of Connecticut. He has written extensively on Puritanism and the Great Awakening. This article is adapted from an address given at the conference "Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience," held at Wheaton College, October 1984

Questions about the spiritual meaning of America have become especially vital and engaged. In the presidential election of 1984, for example, both major party candidates professed a faith in Christianity and acknowledged the Christian sources of American history. Like their predecessors in high political office, they routinely invoked God's blessing on America and spoke of American history as that of a "redeemer nation."

While twentieth-century identifications of America with the "Promised Land" are common, the historical sources of this identity are less clear. Great evangelical leaders of our past are rightly celebrated for their fervent gospel preaching, but their views on America are generally ignored.

This is especially true of Jonathan Edwards, America's foremost theologian and champion of religious revival. Most studies of Edwards focus on his evangelical preaching. But, Edwards also had a good deal to say about his native New England as a "covenant people" and a "New Israel." In articulating these themes, he followed the lead of his Puritan predecessors and anticipated much of the language we hear spoken today by political and religious leaders.

Edwards was ordained at Northampton in 1726. Within a year of that date New England experienced the "Great Earthquake" of November 1727. The quake began, according to several accounts, with a "flash of light," which was then followed by a "horrid rumbling" and "weighty shaking" that continued to reverberate throughout the evening. Weymouth's Thomas Paine recalled the incident: "The motion of the Earth was very great, like the waves of the sea... The strongest houses shook prodigiously and the tops of some Chimnies were thrown down.... It affected the People of N-E, especially those near the Center of it, with more Fear Amazement than ever is thought to have befallen the Land since it had that Name." Awakened sleepers poured into the streets in huddled groups, certain that the day of judgment had come. The aftershocks continued for nine days which, Paine observed, "mightily kept up the Terror of it in the People, and drove them to all possible means of Reformation."

On the day following the earthquake, fasts were called spontaneously throughout the land and repeated several times in the ensuing weeks. In Northampton, Edwards mounted the pulpit and preached a "fast sermon" from Jonah 3:10: "And God saw their works that they turned from their evil way and God repented of the Evil that he had said he would do unto them and he did it not." Unlike regular (Sunday) sermons where Edwards' primary concern was the individual soul, his concern on this occasion was the temporal estate of New England which, he believed, was governed by their corporate covenant with God. Even as his text was devoted to the nation of Nineveh and God's mercy to them because they repented, so also was his concern that day with the nation of New England and the warning contained in their earthquake.

Like other ministers in 1727, Edwards perceived both natural and supernatural meanings in the great earthquake. On the one hand, he drew from the most recent scientific literature to explain that earthquakes were not, in themselves, miracles but natural convulsions that occurred when bodies

of water met with "subterranean Fires" in underground caverns to produce rumblings at ground level. On the other hand, Edwards explained, earthquakes were also used by God to warn a covenant people: "earthquakes and lights in the heaven may often have natural causes yet they may nevertheless be ordered to be as a forerunner of great changes and Judgments."

A little later in the sermon, Edwards made plain that he was speaking in temporal and "federal" (national) terms to the people of Northampton, not in eternal terms, and in so doing illustrated the different ends and logics of the two covenants:

If a nation or people are very corrupt and remain obstinate in the Evil way God generally if not universally exercises these threatenings God is more strict in punishing of a wicked people in this world than a wicked person. God often suffers particular persons that are wicked to prosper in the world and discharges them to judgment in the world to come. But a people as a people are punished only in this world. Therefore God will not suffer a people that grow very corrupt and refuse to be reclaimed to go unpunished in this world.

New England "as a people," was understood by Edwards, then, in temporal terms of rewards and punishments. Corporate morality could not win or merit eternal salvation, but it could insure success on earth.

Edwards considered the earthquake and concluded that "our Land is very much defiled." In particular Edwards cited an "abundance of cheating and injustice," an increase in swearing, and insensitivity to the great concerns of religion. Too many of the inhabitants had grown "secure in riches." Therefore, "God shows us that we are in his hand every moment by this shaking the foundation of the Earth ... [He could] plunge us down to the Pit when he pleases."

Throughout the 1730s and 1740s, most of New England's grievances, like those deplored by Edwards, were internal. Apart from occasional forays against the Indians, New England's borders were safe, and the chief concerns in these years were natural calamities like drought, fire, disease, and pestilence, and internal discord over questions of revival and the New Birth.

Despite New England's precarious peace of that period, however, everyone recognized the possibility of war and presented it as the divine affliction most to be avoided. With the possibility of war ever-present, congregations needed to be constantly reminded of their national standing before God. Edwards was no exception among the Puritan clergy in doing just that.

At a fast sermon delivered in March 1737, Edwards outlined the theology of federal covenants in rich detail. Ancient Israel was the model and prototype for all subsequent covenant people, so Edwards turned to 2 Chronicles 23:16 for his text: "And Jehoiada made a covenant between him, and between all the people, and between the king, that they should be the Lord's people." That text, Edwards explained in his opening remarks, occurred at a point in Israel's history after Judah had worshiped Baal and God allowed the enemy nations to attack his people for their idolatry. Now they had returned to God, renewed the covenant, implored his mercy, and received blessings. In brief compass, Edwards explained to his listeners what was meant by a covenant people:

[S]ome are distinguished of God as a Covenant People. So were the people that were spoken of in the Text. God entered into Covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and brought them out of Egypt and in a Solemn manner entered into Covenant with them in the [desert] and separated them from the [other] nations on the earth to be a Covenant people a peculiar People to the Lord.

As a covenant people, Israel could depend on divine protection and "Temporal Blessings," as long as they honored the terms of God's people. Indeed, Edwards went on, it was the enjoyment of "covenant blessings" that partly distinguished covenant peoples from others.

From ancient Israel, Edwards turned to New England, observing that federal covenants did not cease with the Old Testament, but continued throughout history. Citing God's promise in Exodus 19:6, Edwards assured his listeners that, "if you keep my covenant ye shall be unto me ... an holy nation." Clearly New England was such a people, called of God to be a "peculiar people."

However, if God's people were to continue receiving the blessings of the land they must heed the words of their pastors on days of fasting and repent: "You are a People that have been distinguished of God as a Covenant People for a long time. You have for a long time enjoyed the Preaching of God's Word and the visibility of the Gospel in a steady course." Only by honoring that word and reforming the evil in their communities could God's people expect to continue receiving temporal rewards and prosperity. Otherwise, they would surely suffer the same fate as Israel's at the hands of neighboring enemies. Even now, Edwards warned, there were "great numbers of papists" (the French) to the North, creating in North America an ominous "mixture of dark with light."

In the face of such a threat, New Englanders believed that, as God's covenant people, they had a glorious mission to uphold in this world. That mission required the preservation of their civil and religious liberties against external enemies, liberties essential to their corporate identity as the New Israel. It did not matter which was threatened: remove one and the other was sure to follow. When that happened, God's Word would cease to reign supreme and New England would relinquish its special covenant.

In 1748, when England made a treaty with France, no one saw it as anything more than an armistice, postponing for a time an inevitable conflict. Formal peace did nothing to solve the territorial disputes between France and England, nor did it ease the hatred—both political and religious—that had been accumulating for over a century.

By March of 1755 it was clear to Edwards and other colonial leaders that the armistice with France was about to end. Edwards had left Northampton for Stockbridge in 1751, and to the members of his Stockbridge congregation, set on the outer rim of English civilization, the dangers of renewed war were especially frightening. At a special fast day called in March 1755, Edwards repeated a sermon he delivered in 1744 "on occasion of war with France." It is, Edwards began, "owing to the protection of heaven that our nation and land have not been destroyed before now by the same kind of Enemies with those that ... now oppose [us]." With war approaching, the one lesson the frightened New Englanders had to remember was that "sin above all other things weakens a people in war." When "vice prevails among a people," defeats were sure to follow because among professing peoples, success or failure "corresponds to" their covenant keeping. Conversely, a turning back to God in Northampton or in Stockbridge would prompt God to deliver his people.

Within three months of Edwards' fast sermon, New England's time of trial appeared. In July 1755, General Edward Braddock and his British regulars were decisively defeated on the banks of the Monongahela River by a combined force of French and Indian allies. In New England, one out of every three men able to bear arms was enlisted for service—a figure far exceeding other regions and other colonies. Before the Seven Years' War (or "French and Indian War," as it was known in America) was over, virtually every New England family had at least one member engaged in what would become the largest war fought to that time on North American soil.

The clergy were united in stirring martial resolve and specifying the terms and nature of divine assistance. In this war, as others, they did not discourage armed conflict, but encouraged it for

nationalistic and prophetic reasons.

Self-defense represented the major justification of war, and the covenant supplied the essential terms for victory. Despite their many wars, ministers insisted that New England was not a militaristic culture pursuing armed conquest for the sake of vain glory.

But self-defense was not the only theme invoked in weekday sermons. Millennial speculations and predictions also played a significant, if supporting, role in arousing public support for war. Evangelicals believed that the Roman Catholic Church was the dreaded "Babylon" and "Mother of Harlots" associated in the Book of Revelation with the Anti-Christ. "Popery," Edwards explained. "is the deepest contrivance that ever Satan was the author of to uphold his kingdom."

Equally clear to Edwards and others was New England's own identity as the "true witnesses" of Christ. Despite temporary setbacks and smaller armies, Edwards assured his listeners that "the race is not to the swift," and that even as God delivered his people Israel in time of distress, even so would he provide "a peculiar Encouragement for God's people [in New England] to look for Help and Victory in war." Before that would happen, of course, New Englanders must repent of their sins. Genuine repentance and performance of covenant duties could not merit salvation, but they could win battles. And New Englanders could be sure that any immediate losses in battle were not a final sentence of doom because Scripture clearly foretold the downfall of Anti-Christ.

Edwards' death on March 22, 1758, prevented him from witnessing the final victory over France, though he would not have been surprised. Like other Thanksgiving preachers in 1759 and 1760 he would have ascribed triumph to New England's ongoing covenant with God. Had Edwards lived to witness the unfolding conflict with England, he would probably have supported the "sacred cause" of liberty and turned his pen to calls for moral reformation and promises of national success.

In fact, New Englanders, like Americans later, never lost the big battles. And as long as they continued to win, the covenant was validated and the myth lived on. The vision of a redeemer nation and a covenant people was dazzling and none, including Edwards, could escape its glare. As one voice among thousands, Edwards helped perpetuate that quintessentially Puritan notion of a righteous city set high upon a hill for all the world to see. That notion apparently has yet to run its course. In this sense, we continue to inhabit a world formed largely by the Puritans and Edwards.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 8: Jonathan Edwards & the Great Awakening

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## Jonathan Edwards Speaks to Our Technological Age

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How is Jonathan Edwards relevant today? Is he a distant hero, an evangelist, theologian, saint whom we can admire only from afar? Has the passing of time and changes in religious style put insurmountable barriers between us and him? Do we no longer have access to his keen insights except as impressive historical curiosities?

To the contrary, Edwards has a great deal to say to the contemporary world. Not only does he present powerfully the historic doctrines of the Christian faith; but he presents them with insights that specifically address some major tendencies of modern times.

Edwards lived near the beginning of our modern era. He faced the emergence of two of the major trends that have shaped the style of both our Christianity and our culture. These trends were revivalism and the scientific revolution. Because these trends were new in Edwards' day, he could see more clearly than we do how they were changing people's conceptions of the world and especially changing their perceptions of God's relationship to themselves and to the world.

### True Christian Experience in the Age of Revivals

We can look first at Edwards' insight into the character of true Christian experience. The revival to which Edwards himself contributed in New England was part of a wider pietist revival. Pietism emerged in Germany in the later 1600s, spread to other countries through missionary efforts of groups such as the Moravians, and merged with renewal impulses throughout the Protestant world. In Edwards' day, these forces converged to produce a great revival in the English-speaking world, manifested in the Great Awakening in America, John Wesley's Methodism in England, and George Whitefield's work connecting the English and American awakenings. The thrust of Pietism was to re-emphasize the importance of personal religious experience and active commitment evidenced in the Christian life and works. Such emphases, as expressed by various evangelists, could take many forms. The question for Edwards and other New England Calvinists was whether the revival emphases were faithful to the essentials of Reformation theology.

Having been blessed by "surprising conversions" in his own parish, Edwards was a defender of the revival and certainly of personal religious commitment. These he correctly saw as essential to New England's own Puritan tradition. Nonetheless, he was sensitive to the critics of the Awakening who claimed that the revivalists were irresponsibly manipulating people's emotions and thus producing counterfeit or superficial religious experiences. This accusation became all the more plausible when, after Whitefield's famous tour of America in 1739–40, he was followed by imitators who used crowd-rousing techniques that really did seem to produce more emotional heat than spiritual light. Edwards, a defender of revivalism, was thus confronted with one of the major questions that has faced modern evangelicalism ever since. What is the proper place of emotion in Christian commitment?

Edwards answered by pointing out that central to our genuine religious experiences are our affections. By affections he meant our dispositions or loves that incline or discline toward things. "The holy Scriptures," Edwards observed, "do everywhere place religion very much in the affections; such as fear,

hope, love, hatred, desire, joy, sorrow, gratitude, compassion, and zeal.” Edwards thus defended religion of the heart as opposed to those critics of the revivals who condemned emotionalism to the point of leaving themselves with only a religion of the head, a Christianity that amounted only to believing right doctrines and maintaining proper morals.

As Edwards defended the religion of the heart, however, he warned against two major errors that have plagued the pietist-evangelical-revivalist tradition even more in our day than in his. First, Edwards cautioned against sheer emotionalism. He recognized that revivalists might simply excite the emotions and thus counterfeit genuine conversions. High emotions were neither clear evidence of genuine religion nor of the lack of it. Rather, in his great treatise on **Religious Affections** Edwards carefully mapped out biblical tests for genuine religious experience. These tests included a focus on God’s gracious work, doctrines consistent with biblical revelations, and a life marked by the fruits of the Spirit.

In the course of delineating the biblical standards for genuine Christian experience, Edwards emphasized another lesson much needed in our day. He pointed out the mistake, so common today, of making human nature and human psychology the primary focus of theological analysis, or even sometimes the object of worship. This trend had already begun in Edwards’ day, shifting theological analysis from looking at God to looking at human responses to God. Today this tendency has many manifestations in evangelicalism, both in theologies that celebrate the self and self-fulfillment, and in testimony meetings where the emphasis may subtly shift from God’s grace to congratulating oneself on one’s own remarkable experiences.

Edwards’ theology would allow none of that. He always made crystal clear that God is the central focus in human religious experience. Edwards’ stress on God’s sovereignty was far from a static doctrine. Edwards’ conception of God centered around God’s **love**. God’s very purpose in creating the universe was to express his love, to communicate himself to his creatures, to display to them his glory and his beauty. Thus the essence of true religious experience is to be overwhelmed by a glimpse of the beauty of God, to be drawn to the glory of his perfections, to sense his irresistible love. This experience of being spiritually ravished by God’s beauty, glory and love is something like being overwhelmed by the beauty of a great work of art or music. We can be so enthralled by such beauty that we lose consciousness of our self and self-interests and become absorbed in the magnificent object. So also we might be drawn out of ourselves by the power of the beauty of a truly loveable person. God’s sovereign grace works this way. Our hearts are changed by his irresistible power; but this power is not exercised as an alien mechanical force over our wills. Rather, when our eyes are opened so that we are literally captivated by the beauty, glory, and love of God, when we see this love, manifested most powerfully in the beauty of Christ’s sacrificial love for the undeserving, we are gladly forced to abandon love of self as the central principle in our lives and to turn to the love of God.

Edwards describes our side of this regenerating experience as like being given a sixth sense—a sense of the beauty, glory, and love of God. The Bible, he points out, often speaks in a similar way. “Hence the work of the Spirit of God in regeneration is often in Scripture compared to the giving of a new sense, giving eyes to see, and ears to hear, unstopping the ears of the deaf, and opening the eyes of them that were born blind, and turning from darkness unto light.” So the knowledge of God in true Christian experience will be **sensible** knowledge. It will differ from mere speculative knowledge in the same way that the taste of honey differs from the mere **understanding** that honey is sweet. True Christian experience then, is built not just on knowing and affirming true Christian doctrines, as important as those doctrines may be. It is **affective** knowledge, or a **sense** of the truths the doctrines describe. The Christian, says Edwards in a characteristic statement, “does not merely rationally believe that God is glorious, but he has a sense of the gloriousness of God in his heart.”

### **Christian Experience in the Scientific Technological Age**

Edwards’ analysis of truly God-centered Christian experience in our age of recurrent revivals has its

counterpart in his response to another great force shaping our world today—the scientific revolution. Broadly considered, the scientific-technological revolution has changed the way that most modern people think about things, even in much of their everyday experience. The scientific method, highly appropriate to the laboratory, has become the model for the conduct of most of our business and even leisure activities. This model involves, most basically, the attempt to **objectify** reality. We attempt to eliminate extraneous and distracting subjective and emotional considerations from our important activities. In business and technology our civilization is largely shaped by the irrepressible quest to find the most rational and efficient way to get things done. Rationality and efficiency are typically enhanced if we objectify things rather than personify them. So businesses and governments deal with people most efficiently as abstract numbers.

We modern people easily slip into thinking of our fellow humans as objects, consumers, contributors, numbers to add to our rolls, and so forth. Similarly, we are used to objectifying nature, looking on it as merely something to be used for our technological purposes. The ecology crisis of recent years witnesses to the results of this objectified view of nature as just an extension of our technological systems.

Few of the specific implications of these trends were apparent in Edwards' day. But the first principles out of which the modern world grew were already present. Eighteenth-century philosophers were clearing the way for the objectification of reality by moving their conceptions of God further away from his creation. God might have been, as the Deists of the day said, a sort of great watchmaker in the sky, long ago building the machinery of the universe that today runs by itself according to natural laws discoverable by science. Such eighteenth-century thinkers had, in effect, retired the creator, rather than denying him. The God of the modern age would not interfere with the really important analyses of reality.

Edwards saw clearly the implications of this revolutionary view of things and insisted in response that God must be on center stage in our entire view of reality, our world view. God's essence is love, which for Edwards (as we have seen) meant that God is constantly communicating his character, beauty, love, and glory to his creatures. God then is not simply the creator, long ago and far away, but is every moment intimately involved in sustaining the creation and speaking through it. "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament sheweth forth his handiwork," (Psalm 19:1). God thus has a relationship to his creation something like our relationship to our words. God is quite distinct from the creation, yet the creation has a definite personal quality. It is part of God's own language through which he expresses his goodness and glory to his creatures. Through this divine "light," as Scripture often refers to God's glory, all nature is filled with life, beauty, and joy. Regenerate persons are given eyes to see this light of God's glory and goodness.

Having such a sense of the closeness of God to his creation would not mean that modern Christians would have to abandon scientific-technological pursuits or scientific techniques in the conduct of their businesses and lives. But it would sensitize them to seeing that these objectified ways of dealing with reality, although extremely useful for limited purposes, are artificial and misleading. They are limited methodologies; not at all descriptions of the way reality actually is. With such sensitivities Christians would be constantly reminding themselves, and indeed sensing, that none of our activities can be separated from their spiritual dimensions. We would see that nature is not just an object for our technological exploitation. Rather, even as we use and manage it, we would constantly sense that it is an expression of God's love and beauty to be valued because of that relationship. We would also look at our fellow humans, not as objects to be manipulated by our marketing or propaganda techniques, but creations of God. Though the cosmos is fallen, and humanity is corrupt and blind, still the light of God's glory shines through all his creation, if only we have the eyes to see it.

Moreover, if our hearts are changed by God's love, so must our actions be changed. If we are transformed by seeing the beauty of the love of God, then we shall especially love every act of virtue that reflects God's loving character. If we are overwhelmed by sensing the light of the glory of God, then

we shall see that glory reflected in all of his creation and hence love that which he has created. Although we are far from perfectly transformed in this life, it is only by such a radical expansion of our affections, from our inborn self love, to love of all being because it reflects God's glory, that we can attain true selfless virtue.

Christ's own gracious love to us epitomizes such love for all creation, even love for rebellious humanity. If we are spiritually enthralled by such grace, then we can resist the otherwise irresistible power of our self-love. Then our changed hearts will love especially to do the selfless love that reflects God's love. Our own lives can thus reflect that glorious loving light of the world that can illumine and transform even the drab landscapes and worldviews of our scientific-technological civilization.

Edwards' message is more than relevant today. It is essential.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 8: Jonathan Edwards & the Great Awakening

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## From the Archives: Extracts from Two Sermons by Edwards

Edwards is best remembered for preaching the sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," which greatly affected the congregation at Enfield, Connecticut, on July 8, 1741. The sermon is often held up as an example of the Puritans' pathological obsession with hell and a God of wrath. In truth, the sermon, excerpted below, is a devout appeal to repentance, made to an audience that had no doubts about the reality of hell and a God who would judge mankind. It is not really typical of Edwards' sermons, which more often spoke of the love and joy of the Christian life. The excerpts from "Safety, Fulness, and Sweet Refreshment to Be Found in Christ" are probably more typical of Edwards' preaching. Excerpts from both sermons are reprinted here to show that the preacher of God's wrath could speak sweetly and eloquently of God's love.

Samuel Hopkins, Edwards' friend and first biographer, has left us valuable information about Edwards' preaching style. According to Hopkins, Edwards was a far cry from the stereotyped ranting, gesturing evangelist. In fact, Edwards' soft, solemn voice did not lend itself to loud tirades. Edwards was renowned as a preacher because (quoting Hopkins) "his words were so full of ideas, set in such a plain and striking light, that few speakers have been so able to demand the attention of an audience as he. His words often discovered a great degree of inward fervor, without much noise or external emotion, and fell with great weight on the minds of his hearers." What Edwards lacked in oratorical gifts—Whitefield was the great orator, not Edwards—he made up for with Scripture-based sermons that presented with logic, integrity, and vivid word pictures the need to cling to God.

Edwards went into the pulpit carrying a small booklet, containing the entire text of the sermon he was to preach. He would have already written out the sermon on scraps of paper, which his wife Sarah dutifully had sewn into a booklet. He often berated himself for reading many of his sermons, but he insisted that sound preaching would result if pastors would take the pains to write out their sermons word for word, then commit them to memory before preaching. The sermon extracts below will show that Edwards himself thought through each sermon carefully. They are flawless in their logic and construction, and they attest not only to their creator's rationality and order, but to his warmth and emotional depth as well. They show that head and heart worked together when Edwards held the pulpit.

### **Safety, Fulness, and Sweet Refreshment, to Be Found in Christ**

ISAIAH 32:2

And a man shall be as an hiding-place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.

... There is a provision for the satisfaction and contentment of the thirsty longing soul in Christ, as he is the way to the Father; not only from the fullness of excellency and grace which he has in his own person, but as by him we may come to God, may be reconciled to him, and may be made happy in his favour and love.

The poverty and want of the soul in its natural state consist in its being separated from God, for God is the riches and the happiness of the creature. But we naturally are alienated from God; and God is

alienated from us, our Maker is not at peace with us. But in Christ there is a way for a free communication between God and us; for us to come to God, and for God to communicate himself to us by his Spirit. John 14:6. "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me." Ephes. 2:13, 18, 19. "But now in Christ Jesus, ye who sometimes were far off, are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father. Now, therefore, ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God."

Christ by being thus the way to the Father, is the way to true happiness and contentment. John 10:9. "I am the door: by me, if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture."

Hence I would take occasion to invite needy, thirsty souls to come to Jesus. "In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink." You that have not yet come to Christ, are in a poor, necessitous condition; you are in a parched wilderness, in a dry and thirsty land. And if you are thoroughly awakened, you are sensible that you are in distress and ready to faint for want of something to satisfy your souls. Come to him who is "as rivers of water in a dry place." There are plenty and fulness in him; he is like a river that is always flowing, you may live by it for ever and never be in want. Come to him who has such excellency as is sufficient to give full contentment to your soul, who is a person of transcendent glory, and ineffable beauty, where you may entertain the view of your soul for ever without weariness, and without being cloyed. Accept of the offered love of him who is the only begotten Son of God, and his elect, in whom his soul delighteth. Through Christ, come to God the Father, from whom you have departed by sin. He is the way, the truth, and the life; he is the door, by which if any man enters he shall be saved.

There are quiet rest and sweet refreshment in Christ Jesus, for those that are weary. He is "as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land."...

When sinners come to Christ, he takes away that which was their burden, or their sin and guilt, that which was so heavy upon their hearts, that so distressed their minds.

**First.** He takes away the guilt of sin, from which the soul before saw no way how it was possible to be freed, and which, if it was not removed, led to eternal destruction. When the sinner comes to Christ, it is all at once taken away, and the soul is left free, it is lightened of its burden, it is delivered from its bondage, and is like a bird escaped from the snare of the fowler.

The soul sees in Christ a way to peace with God, and a way by which the law may be answered, and justice satisfied, and yet he may escape; a wonderful way indeed, but yet a certain and a glorious one. And what rest does it give to the weary soul to see itself thus delivered, that the foundation of its anxieties and fears is wholly removed, and that God's wrath ceases, that it is brought into a state of peace with God, and that there is no more occasion to fear hell, but that it is for ever safe!

How refreshing is it to the soul to be at once thus delivered of that which was so much its trouble and terror, and to be eased of that which was so much its burden! This is like coming to a cool shade after one has been traveling in a dry and hot wilderness, and almost fainting under the scorching heat.

And then Christ also takes away sin itself, and mortifies that root of bitterness which is the cause of all the inward tumults and disquietudes that are in the mind, that make it like the troubled sea that cannot rest, and leaves it all calm. When guilt is taken away and sin is mortified, then the foundation of fear, and trouble, and pain is removed, and the soul is left in peace and serenity.

**Secondly.** Christ puts strength and a principle of new life into the weary soul that comes to him. The sinner, before he comes to Christ, is as a sick man that is weakened and brought low, and

whose nature is consumed by some strong distemper: he is full of pain, and so weak that he cannot walk nor stand. Therefore, Christ is compared to a physician. "But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole, need not a physician, but they that are sick." When he comes and speaks the word, he puts a principle of life into him that was before as dead: he gives a principle of spiritual life and the beginning of eternal life; he invigorates the mind with a communication of his own life and strength, and renews the nature and creates it again, and makes the man to be a new creature.

So that the fainting, sinking spirits are now revived, and this principle of spiritual life is a continual spring of refreshment, like a well of living water. "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him, shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life." Christ gives his Spirit, that calms the mind, and is like a refreshing breeze of wind. He gives that strength whereby he lifts up the hands that hang down, and strengthens the feeble knees.

**Thirdly.** Christ gives to those who come to him such comfort and pleasure as are enough to make them forget all their former labour and travail. A little of true peace, a little of the joys of the manifested love of Christ, and a little of the true and holy hope of eternal life, are enough to compensate for all that toil and weariness, and to erase the remembrance of it from the mind. That peace which results from true faith passes understanding, and that joy is joy unspeakable....

Before proceeding to the next particular of this proposition, I would apply myself to those that are weary; to move them to repose themselves under Christ's shadow.

The great trouble of such a state, one would think, should be a motive to you to accept an offer of relief, and remedy. You are weary, and doubtless would be glad to be at rest; but here you are to consider,

1st. That there is no remedy but in Jesus Christ; there is nothing else will give you true quietness. If you could fly into heaven, you would not find it there; if you should take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the earth, in some solitary place in the wilderness, you could not fly from your burden. So that if you do not come to Christ, you must either continue still weary and burdened, or, which is worse, you must return to your old dead sleep, to a state of stupidity; and not only so, but you must be everlastingly wearied with God's wrath.

2d. Consider that Christ is a remedy at hand. You need not wish for the wings of a dove that you may fly afar off, and be at rest, but Christ is nigh at hand, if you were but sensible of it. Rom. 10:6, 7, 8. "But the righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise, Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above:) or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, to bring Christ up again from the dead.) But what saith it? The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart; that is, the word of faith which we preach." There is no need of doing any great work to come at this rest; the way is plain to it; it is but going to it, it is but sitting down under Christ's shadow. Christ requires no money to purchase rest of him, he calls to us to come freely, and for nothing. If we are poor and have no money, we may come. Christ sent out his servants to invite the poor, the maimed, the halt, and the blind. Christ does not want to be hired to accept of you, and to give you rest. It is his work as Mediator to give rest to the weary, it is the work that he was anointed for, and in which he delights. "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound."

3d. Christ is not only a remedy for your weariness and trouble, but he will give you an abundance of the contrary, joy and delight. They who come to Christ, do not only come to a resting-place after they have been wandering in a wilderness, but they come to a banqueting-house where they may rest, and where they may feast. They may cease from their former troubles and toils, and they may enter upon a course of delights and spiritual joys.

Christ not only delivers from fears of hell and of wrath, but he gives hopes of heaven, and the enjoyment of God's love. He delivers from inward tumults and inward pain, from that guilt of conscience which is as a worm gnawing within, and he gives delight and inward glory. He brings us out of a wilderness of pits, and drought, and fiery flying spirits; and he brings us into a pleasant land, a land flowing with milk and honey. He delivers us out of prison, and lifts us off from the dunghill, and he sets us among princes, and causes us to inherit the throne of glory. Wherefore, if any one is weary, if any is in prison, if any one is in captivity, if any one is in the wilderness, let him come to the blessed Jesus, who is as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. Delay not, arise and come away.

There are quiet rest and sweet refreshment in Christ for God's people that are weary.

The saints themselves, while they remain in this imperfect state, and have so much remains of sin in their hearts, are liable still to many troubles and sorrows, and much weariness, and have often need to resort anew unto Jesus Christ for rest. I shall mention three cases wherein Christ is a sufficient remedy.

**First.** There is rest and sweet refreshment in Christ for those that are wearied with persecutions. It has been the lot of God's church in this world for the most part to be persecuted. It has had now and then some lucid intervals of peace and outward prosperity, but generally it has been otherwise. This has accorded with the first prophecy concerning Christ; "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed." Those two seeds have been at enmity ever since the time of Abel. Satan has borne great malice against the church of God, and so have those that are his seed. And oftentimes God's people have been persecuted to an extreme degree, have been put to the most exquisite torments that wit or art could devise, and thousands of them have been tormented to death.

But even in such a case there are rest and refreshment to be found in Christ Jesus. When their cruel enemies have given them no rest in this world; when, as oftentimes has been the case, they could not flee, nor in any way avoid the rage of their adversaries, but many of them have been tormented gradually from day to day, that their torments might be lengthened; still rest has been found even then in Christ. It has been often found by experience; the martyrs have often showed plainly that the peace and calm of their minds were undisturbed in the midst of the greatest bodily torment, and have sometimes rejoiced and sung praises upon the rack and in the fire. If Christ is pleased to send forth his Spirit to manifest his love, and speaks friendly to the soul, it will support it even in the greatest outward torment that man can inflict. Christ is the joy of the soul and if the soul be but rejoiced and filled with divine light, such joy no man can take away; whatever outward misery there be the spirit will sustain it.

**Secondly.** There is in Christ rest for God's people, when exercised with afflictions. If a person labour under great bodily weakness, or under some disease that causes frequent and strong pains, such things will tire out so feeble a creature as man. It may to such an one be a comfort and an effectual support to think that he has a Mediator who knows by experience what pain is; who by his pain has purchased eternal ease and pleasure for him; and who will make his brief sufferings to work out a far more exceeding delight, to be bestowed when he shall rest from his labours and sorrows.

If a person be brought into great straits as to outward subsistence, and poverty brings abundance of difficulties and extremities; yet it may be a supporting, refreshing consideration to such an one to think, that he has a compassionate Saviour, who when upon earth, was so poor that he had not where to lay his head, and who became poor to make him rich, and purchased for him durable riches, and will make his poverty work out an exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

If God in his providence calls his people to mourn over lost relations, and if he repeats his stroke and takes away one after another of those that were dear to him; it is a supporting, refreshing consideration to think, that Christ has declared that he will be in stead of all relations unto those who trust in him.

They are as his mother, and sister, and brother; he has taken them into a very near relation to himself: and in every other afflictive providence, it is a great comfort to a believing soul to think that he has an intercessor with God, that by him he can have access with confidence to the throne of grace, and that in Christ we have so many great and precious promises, that all things shall work together for good, and shall issue in eternal blessedness. God's people, whenever they are scorched by afflictions as by hot sunbeams, may resort to him, who is as a shadow of a great rock, and be effectually sheltered, and sweetly refreshed.

**Thirdly.** There is in Christ quiet rest and sweet refreshment for God's people, when wearied with the buffetings of Satan. The devil, that malicious enemy of God and man, does whatever lies in his power to darken and hinder, and tempt God's people, and render their lives uncomfortable. Often he raises needless and groundless scruples, and casts in doubts, and fills the mind with such fear as is tormenting, and tends to hinder them exceedingly in the Christian course; and he often raises mists and clouds of darkness, and stirs up corruption, and thereby fills the mind with concern and anguish, and sometimes wearies out the soul. So that they may say as the psalmist; "Many bulls have compassed me: strong bulls of Bashan have beset me round. They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and a roaring lion."

In such a case if the soul flies to Jesus Christ, they may find rest in him, for he came into the world to destroy Satan, and to rescue souls out of his hands. And he has all things put under his feet, whether they be things in heaven, or things on earth, or things in hell, and therefore he can restrain Satan when he pleases. And that he is doubtless ready enough to pity us under such temptations, we may be assured, for he has been tempted and buffeted by Satan as well as we. He is able to succour those that are tempted. and he has promised that he will subdue Satan under his people's feet. Let God's people therefore, when they are exercised with any of those kinds of weariness, make their resort unto Jesus Christ for refuge and rest.

### **Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God**

DEUT. 32:35

—Their foot shall slide in due time:—

In this verse is threatened the vengeance of God on the wicked unbelieving Israelites, who were God's visible people, and who lived under the means of grace; but who, notwithstanding all God's wonderful works toward them, remained (as ver. 28) void of counsel, having no understanding in them. Under all the cultivations of Heaven, they brought forth bitter and poisonous fruit; as in the two verses next preceding the text.—The expression I have chosen for my text, ***Their foot shall slide in due time***, seems to imply the following things, relating to the punishment and destruction to which these wicked Israelites were exposed.

1. That they were always exposed to ***destruction***; as one that stands or walks in slippery places is always exposed to fall. This is implied in the manner of their destruction coming upon them, being represented by their foot sliding. The same is expressed, Psalm 73:18,19. "Surely thou didst set them in slippery places; thou castedst them down into destruction: how are they brought into desolation as in a moment?" ...

2. It implies that they were always exposed to sudden unexpected destruction. As he that walks in slippery places is every moment liable to fall, he cannot foresee one moment whether he shall stand or fall the next; and when he does fall, he falls at once without warning: which is also expressed in Psalm 73:18, 19. "Surely thou didst set them in slippery places, thou castedst them down into destruction: how are they brought into desolation as in a moment?" ...

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. Thus all you that never passed under a great change of heart, by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls; all you that were never born again, and made new creatures, and raised from being dead in sin, to a state of new, and before altogether unexperienced, light and life, are in the hands of an angry God. However you may have reformed your life in many things, and may have had religious affections, and may keep up a form of religion in your families and closets, and in the house of God, it is nothing but his mere pleasure that keeps you from being this moment swallowed up in everlasting destruction. However unconvinced you may now be of the truth of what you hear, by and by you will be fully convinced of it. Those that are gone from being in the like circumstances with you, see that it was so with them; for destruction came suddenly upon most of them; when they expected nothing of it, and while they were saying, Peace and safety: now they see, that those things on which they depended for peace and safety, were nothing but thin air and empty shadows.

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. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince: and yet, 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 were suffered 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.

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....

How awful are those words, Isa. 63:3. which are the words of the great God, "I will tread them in mine anger, and will trample them in my fury, and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment." It is perhaps impossible to conceive of the words that carry in them greater manifestations of these three things, viz. contempt, and hatred, and fierceness of indignation. If you cry to God to pity you, he will be so far from pitying you in your doleful case, or showing you the least regard or favour, that, instead of that, he will only tread you under foot. And though he will know that you cannot bear the weight of omnipotence treading upon you, yet he will not regard that, but he will crush you under his feet without mercy; he will crush out your blood, and make it fly, and it shall be sprinkled on his garments, so as to stain all his raiment. He will not only hate you, but he will have you in the utmost contempt; no place shall be thought fit for you, but under his feet, to be trodden down as the mire of the streets.

The misery you are exposed to is that which God will inflict to that end, that he might show what that wrath of Jehovah is. God hath had it on his heart to show to angels and men, both how excellent his love is, and also how terrible his wrath is. Sometimes earthly kings have a mind to show how terrible their wrath is, by the extreme punishments they would execute on those that would provoke them. Nebuchadnezzar, that mighty and haughty monarch of the Chaldean empire, was willing to show his wrath when enraged with Shadrach, Meshech, and Abednego; and accordingly gave order that the burning fiery furnace should be heated seven times hotter than it was before: doubtless, it was raised to the utmost degree of fierceness that human art could raise it. But the great God is also willing

to show his wrath, and magnify his awful majesty and mighty power, in the extreme sufferings of his enemies. Rom. 9:22. "What if God, willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction?" And seeing this is his design, and what he has determined, even to show how terrible the unrestrained wrath, the fury and fierceness, of Jehovah is, he will do it to effect. There will be something accomplished and brought to pass that will be dreadful with a witness. When the great and angry God hath risen up and executed his awful vengeance on the poor sinner, and the wretch is actually suffering the infinite weight and power of his indignation, then will God call upon the whole universe to behold that awful majesty and mighty power that is to be seen in it. Isaiah 33:12–14. "And the people shall be as the burnings of lime, as thorns cut up shall they be burnt in the fire. Hear, ye that are afar off, what I have done; and ye that are near, acknowledge my might. The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness hath surprised the hypocrites," etc.

Thus it will be with you that are in an unconverted state, if you continue in it; the infinite might, and majesty, and terribleness of the omnipotent God shall be magnified upon you, in the ineffable strength of your torments. You shall be tormented in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb; and when you shall be in this state of suffering, the glorious inhabitants of heaven shall go forth and look on the awful spectacle, that they may see what the wrath and fierceness of the Almighty is; and when they have seen it, they will fall down and adore that great power and majesty. Isaiah 66:23, 24. "And it shall come to pass. that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the Lord. And they shall go forth and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me; for their worm shall not die; neither shall their fire be quenched, and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh."

It is everlasting wrath. It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery. When you look forward, you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, which will swallow up your thoughts, and amaze your soul; and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all. You will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance; and then when you have so done, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains. So that your punishment will indeed be infinite. Oh who can express what the state of a soul in such circumstances is! All that we can possibly say about it, gives but a very feeble, faint representation of it; it is inexpressible and inconceivable: for "who knows the power of God's anger?"

How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in 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! And it would be a wonder, if some that are now present should not be in hell in a very short time, even before this year is out. And it would be no wonder if some persons, that now sit here, in some seats of this meetinghouse, in health, quiet and secure, should be there before tomorrow morning. Those of you that finally continue in a natural condition, that shall keep out of hell longest, will be there in a little time! your damnation does not slumber; it will come swiftly, and, in all probability, very suddenly, upon many of you. You have reason to wonder that you are not already in hell. 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 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 the hope of the glory of God. How awful it is 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, where they are flocking from day to day to Christ?

Are there not many here who have lived long in the world, and are not to this day born again? and so are aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and have done nothing ever since they have lived, but treasure up wrath against the day of wrath? Oh, Sirs, your case, in an especial manner, is extremely dangerous. Your guilt and hardness of heart is extremely great. Do not you see how generally persons of your years are passed over and left, in the present remarkable and wonderful dispensation of God's mercy? You had need to consider yourselves and awake thoroughly out of sleep. You cannot bear the fierceness and wrath of the infinite God.—And you, young men and young women, will you neglect this precious season which you now enjoy, when so many others of your age are renouncing all youthful vanities, and flocking to Christ? You especially have now an extraordinary opportunity; but if you neglect it, it will soon be with you as with those persons who spent all the precious days of youth in sin, and are now come to such a dreadful pass in blindness and hardness.—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, when so many other children in the land are converted, and are become the holy and happy children of the King of kings?

And let every one that is yet out of Christ, and hanging over the pit of hell, whether they be old men and women, or middle aged, or young people, or little children, now hearken to the loud calls of God's word and providence. This acceptable year of the Lord, a day of such great favour to some, will doubtless be a day of remarkable vengeance to others. Men's hearts harden, and their guilt increases apace, at such a day as this, if they neglect their souls; and never was there so great danger of such persons being given up to hardness of heart and blindness of mind. God seems now to be hastily gathering in his elect in all parts of the land; and probably the greater part of adult persons that ever shall be saved, will be brought in now in a little time, and that it will be as it was on the great out-pouring of the Spirit upon the Jews in the apostles' days, the election will obtain, and the rest will be blinded. If this should be the case with you, you will eternally curse this day, and will curse the day that ever you were born, to see such a season of the pouring out of God's Spirit, and will wish that you had died and gone to hell before you had seen it. Now undoubtedly it is, as it was in the days of John the Baptist, the axe is in an extraordinary manner laid at the roots of the trees, that every tree which brings not forth good fruit, may be hewn down, and cast into the fire.

Therefore, let everyone 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."

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 8: Jonathan Edwards & the Great Awakening

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## From the Archives: The Earliest Known Letter of Jonathan Edwards

This letter was written by the twelve-year-old Jonathan Edwards to his sister Mary on May 10, 1716.

*Windsor May 10, 1716*

Dear Sister,

Through the wonderful mercy and goodness of God there hath in this place been a verry remarkable stirring and pouring out of the Spirrit of God, and likewise now is but I think I have reason to think it is in some mesure diminished but I hope not much. About thirteen have been joynd to the church in an estate of full communion.

These are those which by enquiry I find you have not heard of that have joynd to the church, viz; John Huntington, Sarah Loomas the daughter of Thomas Loomas, and Esther Elsworth. And their are five that are propounded which ave not added to the church, namely, John Loomas, John Rockwell's wife, Serg't Thomas Elsworth's wife, Isaac Bessel's wife, and Mary Osband I think there comes commonly a Mondays above thirty persons to speak with Father about the condition of their souls.

It is a time of general health in this place. There has five persons died in this place since you have been gone, viz, Old Goodwife Grant and Benjamin Bancraft who was drowned in a boat many rods from shore wherein four young women and many others of the other sex, which were verry remarkably saved, and the two others which died I suppose you have heard of, Margaret Peck of the New Town who was once Margaret Stiles hath lost a sucking babe who died very suddenly and was burried in this place

Abigail Hannah and Lucy have had the chicken pox and are recovered but Jerusha has it now but is almost well.

I myself sometimes am much troubled with the tooth ack but these two or three last days I have not been troubled with it but verry little as far as I know the whole family is well except Jerusha

Sister I am glad to hear of your welfare so often as I do I should be glad to hear from you by a letter and therein hope it is with you as to your crookedness

Your Loving Brother Jonathan E

Father and Mother remember their love unto you. Likewise do all my sisters and Mercy and Tim.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Jonathan Edwards: Recommended Resources

### Edwards' Works:

Edward Hickman, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (Banner of Truth, 1979).

Vergilius Ferm, ed., *Puritan Sage: Collected Writings of Jonathan Edwards* (Library Publishers, 1953)

Paul Ramsey and others, eds., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 6 vols. (other volumes forthcoming) (Yale University Press, 1957–80).

Harold P. Simonson, ed., *Selected Writings of Jonathan Edwards* (Ungar, 1970).

### On Edwards and the Great Awakening:

Elisabeth Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man: The Uncommon Union of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards* (Westminster Press, 1971).

Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Peter Smith, 1974). Reprint of 1966 edition.

Edward H. Davidson, *Jonathan Edwards: The Narrative of a Puritan Mind* (Harvard University Press, 1969).

Edwin S. Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England* (Peter Smith, 1965). Reprint of 1957 edition.

Alan Heimert and Perry Miller, eds., *The Great Awakening* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1967).

Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1981). Reprint of 1949 edition.

Harold P. Simonson, *Jonathan Edwards: Theologian of the Heart* (Eerdmans, 1974).

Patricia J. Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor* (Hill and Wang, 1980).

Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703–1758* (Octagon, 1972). Reprint of 1940 edition.

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