

A Divine and Supernatural Light: The Life and Theology of Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards wrote many, many books. One book, which is not so well known today but was important when Edwards wrote it, is usually called *The Humble Attempt*. The full title is *A Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union Among God's People and Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on Earth*. Books had long titles in those days. This was not a particularly long book, but it did have a long title. And the purpose of this book was to encourage Christians to meet together in united prayer for missions. Out of this book and similar books in Scotland came the famous concert of prayer for missions, which in some sense has continued all the way down to the present.

I would like to pray a prayer based on some of the ideas Jonathan Edwards wrote in his “Humble Attempt” in 1748. Let us pray.

Our Father, in this time of need, we pray for Your power, mercy, and faithfulness. The interest of vital piety has long been in decay, and error and wickedness prevail not only in the world but also in Your church. But we believe, O God, that when Your church is in a low state and oppressed by her enemies and cries to You, You will swiftly fly to our relief as birds fly at the cry of their young. So we pray, our heavenly Father, for the true reviving of Your church among us so that we would not be weak, dull, and lifeless but in good earnest, fervent in spirit, with our hearts vigorously engaged in loving and serving You and our neighbors. And we pray to You, O God, Lord of the harvest, that You would send out Your workers into the fields of this world and soon the knowledge of the glory of the Lord would cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. We pray this for Your glory and in Jesus' name. Amen.

Jonathan Edwards was certainly one of the outstanding Christian thinkers in American history. In fact, historians who are not Christian and who have little appreciation for Edwards' Christianity and even less for his Calvinism, are forced to admit that Edwards indeed was one of the most brilliant minds this country has ever produced. These same historians, however, seem a bit puzzled and dismayed that this smart man could spend so much time writing about biblical prophecy and thinking about such things as the doctrine of predestination. Not only is Edwards a great thinker but certainly one of the great theologians in all of Christian history. One of his more modern admirers, Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones of Westminster Chapel in London, has written these words: “Indeed I am tempted, perhaps foolishly, to compare the Puritans to the Alps, Luther and Calvin to the Himalayas, and Jonathan Edwards to Mount Everest.” Whether that is an appropriate comparison or not, it certainly shows Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones' esteem for this New England Puritan whom we are going to study today.

Edwards' life was spent in a narrow, little world as far as geography was concerned, mostly in central Connecticut and in western Massachusetts with two brief journeys—one to New York to serve in a church when he was a young man and then finally, at the end of his life, to Princeton to become the president of the college of New Jersey. Let me sketch his life first for you and then we will look at the work and ministry of Jonathan Edwards.

This man was born in 1703 to the pastor, Reverend Timothy Edwards, and his wife Esther. He was born in East Windsor, Connecticut. He had 10 sisters. The people in the congregation of Reverend Timothy Edwards and his wife were impressed with the 10 sisters, all of whom were apparently quite tall, six feet tall or so. So, the congregation spoke of the sixty feet of daughters of the pastor and his wife. Soon, they were even more impressed with the little boy of the family because he was so smart. It did not take people long to realize this boy was precocious and brilliant. He knew Latin by the time he was seven. He

learned Greek and Hebrew quickly after that. By the time he was 11 or 12 he was writing essays on such things as spiders and rainbows that people still read with amazement that a child that young could have such insight into these things of nature. He later went to Yale College. About the time he graduated in 1720, a great change came over him. He tells us that in his childhood he was very much dismayed and horrified at the doctrine of God's sovereignty. He said it was a horrible doctrine. Despite growing up in a Puritan home and hearing that teaching, it was not something that appealed to him until later. One day, at Yale, he was reading 1 Timothy 1:17, which is our Scripture text for this lesson. "Now unto the king eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever." Jonathan Edwards wrote that on that day that he read that verse, a sense of the glory of the Divine Being came over him and the doctrine (that is, the doctrine of God's sovereignty) became exceedingly pleasant, bright, and sweet. Notice those words because so much of what Edwards' books say and so many of his sermons will focus on the fact that teaching of the Bible is sweet.

Edwards became a preacher first, serving a small Presbyterian church in New York. He was there only seven or eight months, but we get the picture of a very serious, disciplined young man who drew up a set of resolutions. Eventually these resolutions reached the number of 70. These were resolutions that he wanted to follow, rules and standards to guard and guide his life as a Christian and minister. His resolutions began with these words as a preface: "Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God's help, I do humbly entreat Him, by His grace, to enable me to keep these resolutions so far as they are agreeable to His will for Christ's sake." After those few months in New York in a Presbyterian church, he returned to Yale, where he was a tutor for a short time but then left to go to Massachusetts once again to serve as a pastor. As we see Jonathan Edwards leaving Yale for the last time and entering into the work of the ministry as a pastor, we see a young man about 24 years of age. (Interestingly, that was the same age as Calvin when he first entered into his ministry in Geneva.) This devout young man, as Warfield put it, "with the joy of the Lord in his heart," turned his back on his brilliant academic life in the early months of 1727. He laid aside his philosophical speculations to take up the work of a pastor in Northampton. Most of his life was spent in Northampton. He was there for 23 years. Northampton was an important church, founded second only to Boston in Massachusetts. Edwards went to serve first as an intern under his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, a man already well known in Puritan history. Then in 1729, Edward succeeded his grandfather.

In 1727 he married Sarah Pierpoint. He had had his eye on this young lady for some time. In fact, in 1723, when he was only 20 and Sarah was only 13, he wrote these words: "They say there is a young lady in New Haven who is beloved of that great Being who made and rules the world." It is a very interesting way that Edwards speaks of his admiration for this young girl. He does not even say, "There is a young girl in New Haven who loves the Lord" but "There is a young lady in New Haven whom the Lord loves." There is a book about Sarah and Jonathan. I purchased it some time ago, and my wife was eager to read it. She denied she read it because of the title. I was not altogether sure. The title is *Married to a Difficult Man: the Uncommon Union of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards*. That book, by Elizabeth Dodds, presents very accurately and aptly these two exceedingly complex persons, Sarah and Jonathan. They had a wonderful marriage. In fact, when George Whitfield first visited the Edwards on his missionary journey in the Great Awakening to Massachusetts, he said, "A sweeter couple I have not yet seen. Mrs. Edwards is adorned with a meek and quiet spirit. She talks solidly of the things of God and seemed to be such a helpmate for her husband that she caused me to renew hope and prayer, which I have for some months been putting to God, that He would be pleased to send a daughter of Abraham to be my wife." What a great tribute to Sarah from George Whitfield.

Sarah viewed marriage and ministry as many Puritans did, as a true partnership. She worked with her husband as a pioneer in ministry with women, something that was unusual in those days. When Jonathan

Edwards wrote his book on the revival, he included Sarah's writings (her personal account and her thoughts on the revival) in his book. With Sarah Edwards, we certainly have a woman with piety and intelligence. She was known for her beauty, her wit, and her hospitality. But Sarah and Jonathan both would soon experience some disappointment in their ministry in Northampton because there was a great deal of criticism on the pastor and his wife, even an outstanding pastor like Jonathan Edwards and an outstanding woman like Sarah Edwards.

People criticized Sarah because of her flare for fashion and even because six of her eleven children had been born on the Sabbath day. I am not sure why that would be grounds for criticism, but apparently it was. So, church life was not easy for a pastor and his wife back in those days and probably not today, either. But something of great significance happened in Northampton as this young couple tried to serve the Lord faithfully in that place. In fact, Jonathan spoke of it as a surprising work of God. It was not something they expected but something God gave to them. Revival came in 1734. It began among the young people. When Edwards first went to Northampton he was dismayed at the lack of interest that the young people in the congregation had for the things of God and how they were drifting away from the church. Suddenly, things began to change, and there was a new interest, a new love for God, and a new zeal for God among the youth. And from them this revival spread to the adults so that Jonathan Edwards could write these words: "A great and earnest concern about the great things of religion and the eternal world became universal in all parts of the town." In fact, Edwards said, "The temptation now was to neglect ordinary duties and spend all one's time on matters of religion." He did not recommend that. He wanted people to carry on the way they were in their work, but he was delighted that love and zeal for God now had come to the fore in Northampton. There was intense conviction of sin. As Edwards describes that conviction, there were the normal outward things that people were convicted of but he said that people were mainly convicted of pride and envy. People in the church were trying to deal with these sins and make them right with one another.

Jonathan Edwards never really liked to visit much. He was a great preacher and loved to be in his study, but he did not enjoy going out and visiting people in their homes. In an ironical way, he was doing pastoral visitation as people flocked to his study, asking him the questions that were in their hearts as a result of the revival that was sweeping the town. The congregational life was strengthened and worship was enlivened. Edwards said, "Our public assemblies were then beautiful. The congregation was alive in God's service." Despite the revival, though, problems lingered and finally came to a sharp climax as the people of the church and the pastor clashed over church discipline. Edwards' grandfather and predecessor in the church, Solomon Stoddard, had adopted the halfway covenant. At first, Edwards went along with that. That meant, as you may recall, that people who were baptized and lived decent lives but made no public profession of Christ could bring their own children for baptism. It also meant that people who did not profess to be Christians could receive the Lord's Supper. Edwards began to feel that this was wrong and tried to make some changes to return to the earlier Puritan practices, but people do not like pastors who are always making changes. The congregation at Northampton resisted these changes even though what Edwards was proposing was to go back to the earlier way of doing things. Finally, on June 22, 1750, by a vote of 230 to 23, Jonathan Edwards was dismissed from his congregation. A little later, he preached his farewell sermon. That sermon has neither ranker nor sentimentality. I think Edwards grows in our estimation as we see what he says to this congregation. He said, "How often have I spoken to you, instructed, counseled, directed and fed you, and administered the ordinances among you as the people who were committed to my care and whose precious souls I had charge of." And then he concluded his sermon with a few words of advice—five points: (1) Maintain family order. Every Christian family ought to be, as it were, a little church; (2) Avoid contention; (3) Watch against the encroachments of error; (4) Give yourselves much to prayer. One of Edwards' own resolutions about prayer was "Pray until you have prayed." That was his advice to himself and now he gave it to his

congregation; (5) Take great care with regard to the settlement of a minister—a man of thoroughly sound principles and fervent piety.

With that farewell message, which in one sense can be viewed as one of the best statements of a colonial preacher's conception as his office as God's chosen minister on earth, Jonathan Edwards left Northampton to go to Stockbridge in far western Massachusetts. It was a frontier village, not an important city like Boston or even Northampton. And it was a place where the Indians, the Native Americans, lived. Jonathan Edwards was now 47 years old. He became a missionary to the Mahican Indians as well as the Mohawk Indians who were moving into that area. There were several hundred families of Indians and about a dozen white families. So often you can read in accounts of Edwards' life that he went to Stockbridge because he had no place else to go. He had been fired from his church and his career as a minister was at an end, and he just wanted to go someplace to get away from it all and to have some quiet time to write some books. That really is not a fair description of Edwards' motivation. He went to the Indians because he believed in missions, and he believed that God was now opening the door for him to serve not only the English settlers of New England but even more so the Native Americans. We will see later that William Carey, a Baptist preacher and shoemaker who became a great missionary to India, was called the "father of modern missions." I think we can call Jonathan Edwards the "grandfather of modern missions" for reasons that we will see in a later lesson.

The work with the Indians was not easy. The opposition of whites who lived in that area was strong. They were defrauding the Indians and taking advantage of them. Edwards tried to stop this, and that, of course, brought tension and bitterness on the part of these white settlers. The Indians themselves were not eager to accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And then the French and Indian War was beginning and finally would disrupt the work of missions to the Indians all along the frontier. After seven years in Stockbridge, an invitation came from the trustees of the Presbyterian College of New Jersey at Princeton for Edwards to come as president, interestingly to succeed his son-in-law whose name was Aaron Burr. Edwards did not seize this invitation as a golden opportunity to get away from an uncongenial ministry. It was harder for him to leave the Indians—far harder—than it was for him to go to Stockbridge. But finally he was convinced that it was God's will for him to go to the college. When he arrived in New Jersey late in 1757, he was inoculated for smallpox. Smallpox was a threat, and inoculation had just been developed. Edwards was inoculated and fell victim to the new science because the inoculation did not work as it should have. He actually contracted the disease from the inoculation and died of smallpox after about six weeks at Princeton. He was 55 years old. It is interesting to compare his life to Calvin's because Calvin died when he was 55. His daughter, Esther, was the widow of the Princeton president, Aaron Burr, and the mother of Aaron Burr Junior, who was famous in American history because he killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel and was viewed later as a traitor to the American cause. Esther died two weeks later, and Sarah Edwards, Jonathan Edwards' wife, died that same fall. All are buried in the cemetery at Princeton.

Let me talk now about Jonathan Edwards' work. Much of what I have said in sketching his life touches on his work, but I would like to focus on some aspects of the work and contribution of this important man. Except for two brief periods in his 35-year ministry, he was a pastor. And I think we would say his work was the work of a pastor. In connection with that, one of his great contributions to church history was his promoting and protecting the revival. Edwards wrote a number of books about the Great Awakening. As Richard Lovelace puts it in his *Dynamics of the Spiritual Life*, "These books are the foundational theology of spiritual renewal in English." If you want to know about revivals—true revivals—and what makes a revival a true revival, then read Edwards' books, *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God: Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival in New England* and especially *The Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*. You can read the comment from Warfield, who

summarizes Edwards' main point in these books and also the statement from Martin Lloyd-Jones, whose advice is this: "Read Jonathan Edwards. Go back to something solid, deep, and real."

Edwards was also a great preacher. He once said, "Our people do not need so much to have their heads stored as to have their hearts touched. And they stand in the greatest need of that sort of preaching, which has the greatest tendency to do this." There is certainly a lot of knowledge, information, theology, and doctrine that we find in Edwards' sermons, but there is also a lot of fire and force as well.

I would like to summarize Edwards' preaching with three themes. The first is the glory of God in all things. You cannot read far into Jonathan Edwards' sermons without coming across this great theme as in his sermon, "God Glorified in Man's Dependence." That sermon was preached in Boston. It was a sermon that said that God saves us by grace and not through our works but merely because, and only because, of His gift of grace in our hearts (an Augustinian, Pauline, and Calvinist theme) and that God is glorified by this. God gets all the glory because of our dependence and our lack of ability to do anything—even to believe, which God must enable us to do. That sounds like Calvinist preaching, but it was a mark of the times. There were people in Boston who felt this was some new theology. Two or three generations before, they would have heard this kind of sermon every Sunday. However, the decline had set in in New England Puritanism so that people believed that Edwards was preaching something new.

A second theme that comes out so often in Edwards' preaching is delight in God. I think our preaching frequently does dwell on that first theme, God's sovereignty, but we can learn from Edwards something of the sweet delight and joy that we should know as Christians. Sermons such as "Safety, Fullness and Sweet Refreshment to be Found in Christ" and "A Divine and Supernatural Light" bring out Edwards' emphasis. In that latter sermon, Edwards said, "Even after we have had the pleasure of beholding the face of God millions of ages, it will not grow a dull story. The relish of this delight will be as exquisite as ever." When you read and think about Edwards, you sense a man who was delighted to be in the presence of God. It is almost ecstasy. It is exquisite. It is sweet. These are words that he likes to use. In another sermon called "Christian Pilgrims," Edwards puts it this way: "God is the highest good of the reasonable creature, and the enjoyment of Him is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows, but the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are the scattered beams but God is the sun. These are but the streams but God is the ocean." Do you believe that? Edwards did, and he preached it.

A third theme in Edwards' preaching was the judgment of God. People who know a little bit about Jonathan Edwards know that he preached a sermon called "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." I put this theme third because it does not characterize all of Edwards' preaching. He certainly did preach the wrath of God and the judgment of God, but so much more often he preached the glory of God, the beauty of God, and the delight that we, as Christians, can find in God. His "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is his most famous sermon and probably the most famous sermon preached in American history. It was preached in Enfield in Connecticut. The church is no longer there, but a rock is there where the church once stood. On that rock there is a description giving the details of the preaching of this famous sermon. It is certainly a powerful sermon. As Jonathan Edwards turned the pages of his sermon on that July Sunday in 1741, people in the congregation began to feel that this was their last chance; they were slipping into hell, and they must accept the Gospel today or be eternally lost. One thing we can learn from that sermon is that a Calvinist can preach a very strong message of repentance and call upon people to return to God.

Finally, let me make a few comments on Edwards' theology. It is probably unfortunate to separate these things as I am doing in this outline, but for the sake of clarity I have done it this way. All of Edwards' writing and preaching is theology. Rabbi Duncan said, "His doctrine is all application, and his application is all doctrine." Edwards himself, as he taught and wrote about theology, did not conceive of his doing this for theologians. He was doing it for Christian people. He once said that the trade of a Christian is theology, and it is important for every Christian to know his business. When we think of Jonathan Edwards as a theologian, we would say, first of all, that Edwards was an amazingly independent thinker. He certainly drew on the Reformed tradition, including Calvin. But as Warfield put it, "He would not swear in Calvin's words." He did not frequently quote Calvin. He knew the Puritans and used them. He knew the Scottish Presbyterians, especially Thomas Boston. And he was familiar with and appreciated the Scholastic theologians. Edwards somehow was able to take all of that and, with his Bible, state it in a fresh and different way. I do not think that Edwards always got it right, though. My main complaint about Edwards is that he just could not stop where Calvin would feel we should stop. He wanted to go further. That is fine, but he did not always solve the problem he tried to solve. He sometimes got himself into some difficulty in trying to explain, for example, exactly why Adam fell. But he wrote some great books, some wonderful books. Many of Edwards' books are available in the two large volumes published by Banner of Truth. However, I must warn you that they have very small print. Those two volumes are good for the soul but hard on the eyesight. Dr. Gerstner used to give these books away to people who promised to read them all the way through. I never did accept the two volumes when the offer was made because I was not sure that I could make it through them. Those works of Jonathan Edwards are now coming out in modern editions from Yale. That set will not be complete for many more years, but fortunately modern critical editions of the writings of Jonathan Edwards will someday be available. The great books of theology that Edwards wrote interestingly came from his Stockbridge years when he was preaching to the Indians—*Freedom of the Will*, *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*, and *A History of the Work of Redemption*. He wrote those books in a tiny four-by-eight nook that he called his study. We see in these books that Calvinism, once again, had its advocate belated but powerful and even majestic.

Edwards' influence, of course, continues down to the present. He is someone we should study and learn from. Many tributes have been paid to him. I will close with one from the pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, John Piper, who said, "I owe him more than I could ever explain. He has fed my soul with the beauty of God and holiness of heaven when every other door seemed closed to me. He has renewed my hope and my vision for ministry in some very low times. He has opened the window on the world of the Spirit time and again when all I could see were the curtains of secularism. 'Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us' while we rest upon the safety, fullness, and sweet refreshment to be found in Christ."

The question has been asked, "How long did the revival of 1734 last?" It did not last all that long—a year or two—and then it began to fade. And before long, the First Great Awakening was over. One of the reasons Edwards wrote *The Humble Attempt* was in the decline of the revival to encourage Christian people to pray earnestly for more revival and to pray for the spread of the Gospel worldwide. To Edwards, that was going to be the sign of real revival. The church began to be active in its missionary responsibilities. The First Great Awakening did fade. By the 1740s it was more a memory, as it was for the next 50 years or so, in most places. But then we come to the Second Great Awakening, which is the subject of our next lesson.

I do not know what happened to the church in Northampton after Edwards left. I am not sure whom they called as the next pastor. Somehow I have missed that point. I perhaps read it, but I cannot recall. The glory days were certainly over. The revival had taken place, and Edwards was gone. My impression

would be that the church did not fall away completely or slip into liberalism, not nearly so soon. It is a little disappointing to go to Northampton today because there is not much to see related to Edwards. You would think there would be much more attention given to Edwards in the town, but that is not the case. The best place to view something from Jonathan Edwards is Princeton, where his library was preserved. It was on display at Firestone Library at Princeton University at least for some time. I am not sure if it is still there. It was a room set up just like Jonathan Edwards' study would have been.

I have been asked, "How does Edwards compare with Martin Lloyd Jones on Dr. Lloyd Jones' view of the second baptism of the Holy Spirit?" I know Lloyd Jones' view on that. I am not sure I have read explicitly Edwards' view, but I am almost sure that he would not have agreed. I think Edwards would have had more traditional, Reformed understanding of that. Of course, Dr. Lloyd Jones was Reformed, but he had a particular shift in his understanding of the baptism of the Spirit. I doubt if Edwards would have agreed with it.

The question was asked, "What would Edwards say about manifestations in revival?" Edwards wanted to say two things. He wanted to say that we should not think that people must not become excited, emotional, and involved in religious things. We do about other things. The things of God are the most important things in life. So, religious affections, to Edwards, manifest themselves in some way. However, he did not encourage the physical manifestations. In fact, he tried to discourage those by saying that the true manifestation is in the moral works of the Christian. If you are really excited about God and moved by Him then you should love your neighbor, take care of the poor, and work out the fruits of the Spirit in your own life. Edwards was convinced that whenever God would work, the devil would work. His illustration was this: "The spring brings the flowers. It also brings the frogs that croak." So, you are going to have flowers and croaking frogs at the same time. God gives us wisdom to love the flowers and not the frogs but not to tear up the flowers because of the frogs. It seems to be that Edwards is able to walk the line between appreciating what is true in revival and avoiding the excesses. The revival produced great problems as well as blessings. Perhaps we can look at some of that later. There will always be problems and blessing when revival comes. For that reason, we will have to turn back again and again to Jonathan Edwards to separate the wheat from the chaff. It is not easy to do, particularly in the moment in which it is taking place. With Edwards, we have an historical perspective—someone who has theologically thought through it very carefully. I would urge you to read some of that revival literature from Jonathan Edwards. Then watch and pray and see what is going on today, but keep one eye on Edwards and one eye on the modern situation.