

PART ONE

THE LIFE AND LEGACY
OF EDWARDS

A GOD-ENTRANCED VISION OF ALL THINGS: WHY WE NEED JONATHAN EDWARDS 300 YEARS LATER

John Piper

One of the reasons that the world and the church need Jonathan Edwards 300 years after his birth is that his God-entranced vision of all things is so rare and yet so necessary. Mark Noll wrote about how rare it is:

Edwards' piety continued on in the revivalist tradition, his theology continued on in academic Calvinism, but there were no successors to his God-entranced world view. . . . The disappearance of Edwards' perspective in American Christian history has been a tragedy.¹

Evangelicalism today in America is basking in the sunlight of ominously hollow success. Evangelical industries of television and radio and publishing and music recordings, as well as hundreds of growing mega-churches and some public figures and political movements, give outward impressions of vitality and strength. But David Wells, Os Guinness, and others have warned of the hollowing out of evangelicalism from within.

The strong timber of the tree of evangelicalism has historically been the great doctrines of the Bible:

- God's glorious perfections
- man's fallen nature

¹ Mark Noll, "Jonathan Edwards, Moral Philosophy, and the Secularization of American Christian Thought," *Reformed Journal* 33 (February 1983): 26.

- the wonders of redemptive history
- the magnificent work of redemption in Christ
- the saving and sanctifying work of grace in the soul
- the great mission of the church in conflict with the world, the flesh, and the devil
- the greatness of our hope of everlasting joy at God's right hand

These unspeakably magnificent things once defined us and were the strong timber and root supporting the fragile leaves and fruit of our religious affections and moral actions. But this is not the case for many churches and denominations and ministries and movements in Evangelicalism today. And that is why the waving leaves of present evangelical success and the sweet fruit of prosperity are not as promising as we may think. There is a hollowness to this triumph, and the tree is weak even while the leafy branches are waving in the sun.

What is missing is the mind-shaping knowledge and the all-transforming enjoyment of the weight of the glory of God. The glory of God—holy, righteous, all-sovereign, all-wise, all-good—is missing. God rests lightly on the church in America. He is not felt as a weighty concern. Wells puts it starkly: “It is this God, majestic and holy in his being, this God whose love knows no bounds because his holiness knows no limits, who has disappeared from the modern evangelical world.”² It is an overstatement. But not without warrant.

What Edwards saw in God and in the universe because of God, through the lens of Scripture, was breathtaking. To read him, after you catch your breath, is to breathe the uncommon air of the Himalayas of revelation. And the refreshment that you get from this high, clear, God-entranced air does not take out the valleys of suffering in this world, but fits you to spend your life there for the sake of love with invincible and worshipful joy.

In 1735 Edwards preached a sermon on Psalm 46:10, “Be still, and know that I am God.” From the text he developed the following doctrine: “Hence, the bare consideration that God is God, may well be sufficient to still all objections and opposition against the divine sovereign dispensations.”³ When Jonathan Edwards became still and contem-

² David Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 300.

³ Jonathan Edwards, “The Sole Consideration, That God Is God, Sufficient to Still All Objections to His Sovereignty,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman, 2 vols. (1834; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 2:107.

plated the great truth that *God is God*, he saw a majestic Being whose sheer, absolute, uncaused, ever-being existence implied infinite power, infinite knowledge, and infinite holiness. And so he went on to argue like this:

It is most evident by the Works of God, that his understanding and power are infinite. . . . Being thus infinite in understanding and power, he must also be perfectly holy; for unholiness always argues some defect, some blindness. Where there is no darkness or delusion, there can be no unholiness. . . . God being infinite in power and knowledge, he must be self-sufficient and all-sufficient; therefore it is impossible that he should be under any temptation to do any thing amiss; for he can have no end in doing it. . . . So God is essentially holy, and nothing is more impossible than that God should do amiss.⁴

When Jonathan Edwards became still and knew that God is God, the vision before his eyes was of an absolutely sovereign God, self-sufficient in himself and all-sufficient for his creatures, infinite in holiness, and therefore perfectly glorious—that is, infinitely beautiful in all his perfections. God's actions therefore are never motivated by the need to meet his deficiencies (since he has none), but are always motivated by the passion to display his glorious sufficiency (which is infinite). He does everything that he does—absolutely everything—for the sake of displaying his glory.

Our duty and privilege, therefore, is to conform to this divine purpose in creation and history and redemption—namely, to reflect the value of God's glory—to think and feel and do whatever we must to make much of God. Our reason for being, our calling, our joy is to render visible the glory of God. Edwards writes:

All that is ever spoken of in the Scripture as an ultimate end of God's works is included in that one phrase, *the glory of God*. . . . The refulgence shines upon and into the creature, and is reflected back to the luminary. The beams of glory come from God, and are something of God and are refunded back again to their original. So that the whole is *of* God, and *in* God, and *to* God, and God is the beginning, middle and end in this affair.⁵

⁴ Ibid., 107-108.

⁵ Jonathan Edwards, "The Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 526, 531.

This is the essence of Edwards's God-entranced vision of all things! God is the beginning, the middle, and the end of *all things*. Nothing exists without his creating it. Nothing stays in being without his sustaining word. Everything has its reason for existing from him. Therefore nothing can be understood apart from him, and all understandings of all things that leave him out are superficial understandings, since they leave out the most important reality in the universe. We can scarcely begin to feel today how God-ignoring we have become, because it is the very air we breathe.

This is why I say that Edwards's God-entranced vision of all things is not only rare but also necessary. If we do not share this vision, we will not consciously join God in the purpose for which he created the universe. And if we do not join God in advancing his aim for the universe, then we waste our lives and oppose our Creator.

HOW TO RECOVER EDWARDS'S GOD-ENTRANCED VISION OF ALL THINGS

How then shall we recover this God-entranced vision of all things? Virtually every chapter in this book will contribute to that answer. So I will not try to be sweeping or comprehensive. I will focus on what for me has been the most powerful and most transforming biblical truth that I have learned from Edwards. I think that if the church would grasp and experience this truth, she would awaken to Edwards's God-entranced vision of all things.

No one in church history that I know, with the possible exception of St. Augustine, has shown more clearly and shockingly the infinite—I use the word carefully—importance of joy in the very essence of what it means for God to be God and what it means for us to be God-glorifying. Joy always seemed to me peripheral until I read Jonathan Edwards. He simply transformed my universe by putting joy at the center of what it means for God to be God and what it means for us to be God-glorifying. We will become a God-entranced people if we see joy the way Edwards saw joy.

JOY IS AT THE HEART OF WHAT IT MEANS FOR GOD TO BE GOD-GLORIFYING

Listen as he weaves together God's joy in being God and our joy in his being God:

Because [God] infinitely values his own glory, consisting in the knowledge of himself, love to himself . . . *joy in himself*; he therefore valued the image, communication or participation of these, in the creature. And it is because he values himself, that he delights in the knowledge, and love, and joy of the creature; as being himself the object of this knowledge, love and complacence. . . . [Thus] God's respect to the creature's good, and his respect to himself, is not a divided respect; but both are united in one, as the happiness of the creature aimed at, is happiness in union with himself.⁶

In other words, for God to be the holy and righteous God that he is, he must delight infinitely in what is infinitely delightful. He must enjoy with unbounded joy what is most boundlessly enjoyable; he must take infinite pleasure in what is infinitely pleasant; he must love with infinite intensity what is infinitely lovely; he must be infinitely satisfied with what is infinitely satisfying. If he were not, he would be fraudulent. Claiming to be wise, he would be a fool, exchanging the glory of God for images. God's joy in God is part of what it means for God to be God.

Press a little further in with me. Edwards makes this plain as he sums up his spectacular vision of the inner life of the Trinity—that is, the inner life of what it is for God to be one God in three Persons:

The Father is the deity subsisting in the prime, unoriginated and most absolute manner, or the deity in its direct existence. The Son is the deity [eternally] generated by God's understanding, or having an idea of Himself and subsisting in that idea. The Holy Ghost is the deity subsisting in act, or the divine essence flowing out and breathed forth in *God's infinite love to and delight in Himself*. And . . . the whole Divine essence does truly and distinctly subsist both in the Divine idea and Divine love, and that each of them are properly distinct persons.⁷

You cannot elevate joy higher in the universe than this. Nothing greater can be said about joy than to say that one of the Persons of the Godhead subsists in the act of God's delight in God—that ultimate and infinite joy is the Person of the Holy Spirit. When we speak of the place of joy in our lives and in the life of God, we are not playing games. We

⁶ Ibid., 532-533 (emphasis added).

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, "Essay on the Trinity," in *Treatise on Grace and Other Posthumously Published Writings*, ed. Paul Helm (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 1971), 118.

are not dealing with peripherals. We are dealing with infinitely important reality.

JOY IS AT THE HEART OF WHAT IT MEANS FOR *US* TO BE GOD-GLORIFYING

So joy is at the heart of what it means for God to be God. And now let us see how it is at the heart of what it means for us to be God-glorifying. This follows directly from the nature of the Trinity. God is Father *knowing* himself in his divine Son, and God is Father *delighting* in himself by his divine Spirit. Now Edwards makes the connection with how God's joy in being God is at the heart of how we glorify God. What you are about to read has been for me the most influential paragraph in all the writings of Edwards:

God is glorified within Himself these two ways: 1. By appearing . . . to Himself in His own perfect idea [of Himself], or in His Son, who is the brightness of His glory. 2. By enjoying and delighting in Himself, by flowing forth in infinite . . . delight towards Himself, or in his Holy Spirit. . . . So God glorifies Himself toward the creatures also in two ways: 1. By appearing to . . . their understanding. 2. In communicating Himself to their hearts, and in their rejoicing and delighting in, and enjoying, the manifestations which He makes of Himself. . . . *God is glorified not only by His glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in.* When those that see it delight in it, God is more glorified than if they only see it. His glory is then received by the whole soul, both by the understanding and by the heart. God made the world that He might communicate, and the creature receive, His glory; and that it might [be] received both by the mind and heart. He that testifies his idea of God's glory [doesn't] glorify God so much as he that testifies also his approbation of it and his delight in it.⁸

⁸ "Miscellanies," no. 448, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (WJE), vol. 13, *The "Miscellanies,"* ed. Thomas Schafer (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), 495, emphasis added. See also "Miscellanies," no. 87 (251-252), no. 332 (410), and no. 679 (not in the New Haven volume). In another place where Edwards speaks of God's joy in being God and our joy in his being God, he makes explicit that this is why God's passion for our joy and his glory are not at odds.

Because [God] infinitely values his own glory, consisting in the knowledge of himself, love to himself, [that is,] complacency and joy in himself; he therefore valued the image, communication or participation of these, in the creature. And it is because he values himself, that he delights in the knowledge, and love, and joy of the creature; as being himself the object of this knowledge, love and complacency. . . . [Thus] God's respect to the creature's good, and his respect to himself, is not a divided respect; but both are united in one, as the happiness of the creature aimed at, is happiness in union with himself. "Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World" (532-533, emphasis added).

The implications of this paragraph for all of life are immeasurable. One of those implications is that the end and goal of creation hangs on *knowing* God with our minds and *enjoying* God with our hearts. The very purpose of the universe—reflecting and displaying the glory of God—hangs not only on true knowledge of God, but also on authentic joy in God. “God is glorified,” Edwards says, “not only by His glory’s being seen, but by its being rejoiced in.”

Here is the great discovery that changes everything. God is glorified by our being satisfied in him. The chief end of man is not merely to glorify God *and* enjoy him forever, but to glorify God *by* enjoying him forever. The great divide that I thought existed between God’s passion for his glory and my passion for joy turned out to be no divide at all, if my passion for joy is passion for joy *in God*. God’s passion for the glory of God and my passion for joy in God are one.

What follows from this, I have found, shocks most Christians, namely, that we should be blood-earnest—deadly serious—about being happy in God. We should pursue our joy with such a passion and a vehemence that, if we must, we would cut off our hand or gouge out our eye to have it. God being glorified in us hangs on our being satisfied in him. Which makes our being satisfied in him infinitely important. It becomes the animating vocation of our lives. We tremble at the horror of not rejoicing in God. We quake at the fearful lukewarmness of our hearts. We waken to the truth that it is a treacherous sin not to pursue that satisfaction in God with all our hearts. There is one final word for finding delight in the creation more than in the Creator: *treason*.

Edwards put it like this: “I do not suppose it can be said of any, that their love to their own happiness . . . can be in too high a degree.”⁹ Of course, a passion for happiness can be misdirected to wrong objects, but it cannot be too strong.¹⁰ Edwards argued for this in a sermon that he preached on Song of Solomon 5:1, which says, “Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love!” He drew out the following doctrine: “Persons need

⁹ Jonathan Edwards, “Charity and Its Fruits,” *WJE*, 8:255.

¹⁰ It’s the same thing C. S. Lewis said in *The Weight of Glory*:

If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory, and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1965), 2.

not and ought not to set any bounds to their spiritual and gracious appetites.” Rather, he says, they ought

to be endeavoring by all possible ways to inflame their desires and to obtain more spiritual pleasures. . . . Our hungerings and thirstings after God and Jesus Christ and after holiness can’t be too great for the value of these things, for they are things of infinite value. . . . [Therefore] endeavor to promote spiritual appetites by laying yourself in the way of allure-ment. . . .¹¹ There is no such thing as excess in our taking of this spiritual food. There is no such virtue as temperance in spiritual feasting.¹²

This led Edwards to say of his own preaching and the great goals of his own ministry:

I should think myself in the way of my duty to raise the affections of my hearers as high as possibly I can, provided that they are affected with nothing but truth, and with affections that are not disagreeable to the nature of what they are affected with.¹³

White-hot affections for God set on fire by clear, compelling, biblical truth was Edwards’s goal in preaching and life, because it is the goal of God in the universe. This is the heart of Edwards’s God-entranced vision of all things.

Perhaps the best way to unfold the implications of this vision is to let Edwards answer several objections that are raised.

Objections to Edwards

Objection #1: Doesn’t this make me too central in salvation? Doesn’t it put me at the bottom of my joy and make me the focus of the universe?

Edwards answers with a very penetrating distinction between the joy of the hypocrite and the joy of the true Christian. It is a devastating distinction for modern Christians because it exposes the error of defining God’s love as “making much of us.”

¹¹ Jonathan Edwards, “Sacrament Sermon on Canticles 5:1,” sermon manuscript (1729), Beinecke Library, Yale University.

¹² Jonathan Edwards, “The Spiritual Blessings of the Gospel Represented by a Feast,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 14, *Sermons and Discourses, 1723-1729*, ed. Kenneth Minkema (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), 286.

¹³ Jonathan Edwards, “Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4, *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1972), 387.

This is . . . the difference between the joy of the hypocrite, and the joy of the true saint. The [hypocrite] rejoices in himself; self is the first foundation of his joy: the [true saint] rejoices in God. . . . True saints have their minds, in the first place, inexpressibly pleased and delighted with the sweet ideas of the glorious and amiable nature of the things of God. And this is the spring of all their delights, and the cream of all their pleasures. . . . But the dependence of the affections of hypocrites is in a contrary order: *they first rejoice . . . that they are made so much of by God; and then on that ground, he seems in a sort, lovely to them.*¹⁴

The answer to the objection above is “no.” Edwards’s call for a God-enthralled heart does not make the enthralled one central. It makes God central. Indeed it exposes every joy as idolatrous that is not, ultimately, joy in God. As St. Augustine prayed, “He loves thee too little who loves anything together with Thee, which he loves not for thy sake.”¹⁵

Objection #2: Won’t this emphasis on pleasure play into the central corruption of our age, the unbounded pursuit of personal ease and comfort and pleasure? Won’t this emphasis soften our resistance to sin?

Many Christians think stoicism is a good antidote to sensuality. It isn’t. It is hopelessly weak and ineffective. And the reason it fails is that the power of sin comes from its promise of pleasure and is meant to be defeated by the superior promise of pleasure in God, not by the power of the human will. Willpower religion, when it succeeds, gets glory for the will. It produces legalists, not lovers. Edwards saw the powerlessness of this approach and said:

We come with double forces against the wicked, to persuade them to a godly life. . . . The common argument is the profitableness of religion, but alas, the wicked man is not in pursuit of profit; ’tis pleasure he seeks. Now, then, we will fight with them with their own weapons.¹⁶

In other words, Edwards says, the pursuit of pleasure in God is not only not a compromise with the sensual world, but is the only power that can

¹⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, *Religious Affections*, ed. John Smith (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1959), 249-250 (emphasis added).

¹⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, X.24.

¹⁶ Jonathan Edwards, “The Pleasantness of Religion,” in *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader*, ed. Wilson H. Kinnach, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Douglas A. Sweeney (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1999), 23-24.

defeat the lusts of the age while producing lovers of God, not legalists who boast in their willpower. If you love holiness, if you weep over the moral collapse of our culture, I pray you will get to know Edwards's God-enthralled vision of all things.

Objection #3: Surely repentance is a painful thing and will be undermined by this stress on seeking our pleasure. Surely revival begins with repentance, but you seem to make the awakening of delight the beginning.

The answer to this objection is that no one can feel brokenhearted for not treasuring God until he tastes the pleasure of having God as a treasure. In order to bring people to the sorrow of repentance, you must first bring them to see God as their delight. Here it is in the very words of Edwards:

Though [repentance] be a deep sorrow for sin that God requires as necessary to salvation, yet the very nature of it necessarily implies delight. Repentance of sin is a sorrow arising from the sight of God's excellency and mercy, but the apprehension of excellency or mercy must necessarily and unavoidably beget pleasure in the mind of the beholder. 'Tis impossible that anyone should see anything that appears to him excellent and not behold it with pleasure, and it's impossible to be affected with the mercy and love of God, and his willingness to be merciful to us and love us, and not be affected with pleasure at the thoughts of [it]; but this is the very affection that begets true repentance. How much soever of a paradox it may seem, it is true that repentance is a sweet sorrow, so that the more of this sorrow, the more pleasure.¹⁷

This is astonishing and true. And if you have lived long with Christ and are aware of your indwelling sin, you will have found it to be so. Yes, there is repentance. Yes, there are tears of remorse and brokenheartedness. But they flow from a new taste of the soul for the pleasures at God's right hand that up till now have been scorned.

Objection #4: Surely elevating the pursuit of joy to supreme importance will overturn the teaching of Jesus about self-denial. How can you affirm a passion for pleasure as the driving force of the Christian life and at the same time embrace self-denial?

Edwards turns this objection right on its head and argues that self-

¹⁷ Ibid., 18-19.

denial not only does not contradict the quest for joy, but in fact destroys the root of sorrow. Here is the way he says it:

Self-denial will also be reckoned amongst the troubles of the godly. . . . But whoever has tried self-denial can give in his testimony that they never experience greater pleasure and joys than after great acts of self-denial. Self-denial destroys the very root and foundation of sorrow, and is nothing else but the lancing of a grievous and painful sore that effects a cure and brings abundance of health as a recompense for the pain of the operation.¹⁸

In other words, the whole approach of the Bible, Edwards would say, is to persuade us that denying ourselves the “fleeting pleasures of sin” (Heb. 11:25) puts us on the path of “pleasures forevermore” at God’s right hand (Ps. 16:11). There is no contradiction between the centrality of delight in God and the necessity of self-denial, since self-denial “destroys the root . . . of sorrow.”¹⁹

Objection #5: Becoming a Christian adds more trouble to life and brings persecutions, reproaches, suffering, and even death. It is misleading, therefore, to say that the essence of being a Christian is joy. There are overwhelming sorrows.

This would be a compelling objection in a world like ours, so full of suffering and so hostile to Christianity, if it were not for the sovereignty and goodness of God. Edwards is unwavering in his biblical belief that God designs all the afflictions of the godly for the increase of their everlasting joy.

He puts it in a typically striking way: “Religion [Christianity] brings no new troubles upon man but what have more of pleasure than of trouble.”²⁰ In other words, the only troubles that God permits in the lives of his children are those that will bring more pleasure than trouble with them—when all things are considered. He cites four passages of Scripture. “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you

¹⁸ Edwards, “The Pleasantness of Religion,” 19.

¹⁹ Edwards explains the paradox of self-denial in another way: “There is no pleasure but what brings more of sorrow than of pleasure, but what the godly man either does or may enjoy” (“The Pleasantness of Religion,” 18). In other words, there is no pleasure that godly people may not enjoy except those that bring more sorrow than pleasure. Or to put it in the astonishing way that makes it understandable: Christians may seek and should seek only those pleasures that are maximally pleasurable—that is, that have the least sorrows as consequences, including in eternity.

²⁰ Edwards, “The Pleasantness of Religion,” 18. He goes on to say, “Reproaches are ordered by God for this end, that they may destroy sin, which is the chief root of the troubles of the godly man, and the destruction of it a foundation for delight” (19).

and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven” (Matt. 5:11). “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (Jas. 1:2-3). “Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts 5:41). “You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one” (Heb. 10:34).

In other words, yes, becoming a Christian adds more trouble to life and brings persecutions, reproaches, suffering, and even death. Yes, there are overwhelming sorrows. But the pursuit of infinite pleasure in God, and the confidence that Christ has purchased it for us, does not contradict these sufferings but carries them. By this joy and this hope we are able to suffer on the Calvary road of ministry and missions and love. “For the joy that was set before him” Jesus “endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2). He fixed his gaze on the completion of his joy. That gaze sustained the greatest act of love that ever was. The same gaze—the completion of our joy in God—will sustain us as well. The pursuit of that joy doesn’t contradict suffering—it carries it. The completion of Christ’s great, global mission will demand suffering. Therefore, if you love the nations, pursue this God-entranced vision of all things.

Objection #6: Where is the cross of Jesus Christ in all of this? Where is regeneration by the Holy Spirit? Where is justification by faith alone?

I will not answer these questions here, but rather in the sermon reprinted in the first appendix at the end of this book. Sometimes the more precious and important things you save for last.

Objection #7: Did not Edwards extol the virtue of “disinterested love” to God? How could love to God that is driven by the pursuit of pleasure in God be called “disinterested”?

It’s true Edwards used the term “disinterested love” in reference to God.

I must leave it to everyone to judge for himself . . . concerning mankind, how little there is of this disinterested love to God, this pure divine affection, in the world.²¹

²¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 3, *Original Sin*, ed. Clyde A. Holbrook (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970), 144.

There is no other love so much above the selfish principle as Christian love is; no love that is so free and disinterested, and in the exercise of which God is so loved for himself and his own sake.²²

But the key to understanding his meaning is found in that last quote. Disinterested love to God is loving God “for himself and his own sake.” In other words, Edwards used the term “disinterested love” to designate love that delights in God for his own greatness and beauty, and to distinguish it from love that delights only in God’s gifts. Disinterested love is not love without pleasure. It is love whose pleasure is in God himself.

In fact, Edwards would say there is no love to God that is not delight in God. And so if there is a disinterested love to God, there is disinterested delight in God. And in fact, that is exactly the way he thinks. For example, he says:

As it is with the love of the saints, so it is with their joy, and spiritual delight and pleasure: the first foundation of it, is not any consideration or conception of their *interest in* divine things; but it primarily consists in the *sweet entertainment* their minds have in the view . . . of the divine and holy beauty of these things, as they are in themselves.²³

The “interest” that he rules out does not include “sweet entertainment.” “Interest” means the benefits received other than delight in God himself. And “disinterested” love is the “sweet entertainment” or the joy of knowing God himself.²⁴

Objection #8: Doesn't the elevation of joy to such a supreme position in God and in glorifying God lead away from the humility and brokenness that ought to mark the Christian? Doesn't it have the flavor of triumphalism, the very thing that Edwards disapproved in the revival excesses of his day?

It could be taken that way. All truths can be distorted and misused.

²² Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1969), 174.

²³ Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 249, emphasis added.

²⁴ Norman Fiering is right in the following quote if you take “disinterested” in the absolute sense of no benefit whatever, not even the “sweet entertainment” of beholding God: “Disinterested love to God is impossible because the desire for happiness is intrinsic to all willing or loving whatsoever, and God is the necessary end of the search for happiness. Logically one cannot be disinterested about the source or basis of all interest.” Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards' Moral Thought in Its British Context* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 161.

But if this happens, it will not be the fault of Jonathan Edwards. The God-enthralled vision of Jonathan Edwards does not make a person presumptuous—it makes him meek. Listen to these beautiful words about brokenhearted joy.

All gracious affections that are a sweet odor to Christ, and that fill the soul of a Christian with a heavenly sweetness and fragrancy, are brokenhearted affections. A truly Christian love, either to God or men, is a humble brokenhearted love. The desires of the saints, however earnest, are humble desires: their hope is a humble hope; and their joy, even when it is unspeakable, and full of glory, is a humble brokenhearted joy, and leaves the Christian more poor in spirit, and more like a little child, and more disposed to a universal lowliness of behavior.²⁵

The God-enthralled vision of Jonathan Edwards is rare and necessary, because its foundations are so massive and its fruit is so beautiful. May the Lord himself open our eyes to see it in these days together and be changed. And since we are great sinners and have a great Savior, Jesus Christ, may our watchword ever be, for the glory of God, “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor. 6:10).

²⁵ Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 348-349.

JONATHAN EDWARDS: HIS LIFE AND LEGACY

Stephen J. Nichols

Those prone to visit historical sites are likely to be disappointed when it comes to sites associated with the life of Jonathan Edwards. The home of his birth and early years in East Windsor, Connecticut, no longer stands. Neither does his home at Northampton, Massachusetts, nor his home at Stockbridge. At the former, a Roman Catholic church marks the spot; as for the latter, a sundial stands in its place. The church building where Edwards listened to his father preach in East Windsor has long been gone. The church at Northampton is actually the fifth building since Edwards last preached a sermon there; Stockbridge is on its fourth building. A rock along the side of the road marks the spot where the church at Enfield, Connecticut, once stood, the place where Edwards delivered the most famous American sermon of all time, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

The legacy of Edwards’s life and thought, however, stands in stark contrast to the paucity of the remains of his homes and churches. In the nineteenth century, theologians and church leaders all vied for the claim to carry Edwards’s mantle, asserting to be his true heir. In the twentieth and now the twenty-first century, scholars, clergy, and laity all continue to look to the New England divine for ideas and inspiration. In fact, Edwards may be even more well-known and discussed now than he was in his own lifetime. And greater still is the potential for the impact of his thought and life to direct future generations of the church toward a God-centered life.

This ongoing legacy has everything to do with the breadth of Edwards’s writings and the depth of his encounter with God. While the material remains of Edwards’s life may be scarce, the literary

remains literally fill shelf after shelf. Among these writings are his great treatises, such as the classic theological text *Religious Affections* and the classic philosophical text *Freedom of the Will*.¹ Additionally, he left behind 1,400 sermons, the bulk of which have yet to be published. Add to this mix volumes of notes on a variety of subjects, the “Miscellanies,” exegetical reflections that amount to biblical commentaries, scientific essays, and a host of letters. Edwards left enough material to keep scores of historians, philosophers, theologians, pastors, and laity quite busy. And busy they have been. No other colonial figure, not even Benjamin Franklin or George Washington, has generated the literature from dissertations to popular articles and treatments as Jonathan Edwards has. The number is fast approaching 4,000.²

The writings of Edwards comprise only part of the explanation for his legacy. The other part is the depth of his encounter with God. Edwards remarkably managed to hold together what we tend to split apart. He saw Christianity as engaging both head and heart, while much of popular evangelicalism suffers greatly from pendulum swings in this regard. He had an overwhelming vision of the beauty and excellency of Christ, the love and sweet communion of the Holy Spirit, and the glory and majesty of God, while simultaneously seeing wrath and judgment, punishment and justice, as also comprising the divine nature. He had a profound sense of grace and forgiveness, coupled with an acute sense of guilt and repentance. In short, Edwards knew the beauty of Christ because he knew palpably the ugliness of sin. In fact, it might just be the case that precisely because of his awareness of sin, he so exalted the sweetness of his Savior. And perhaps there is much for evangelicals of today and tomorrow to learn here.

Edwards learned these ideas in the trenches of his life, through the highs and lows of his ministry, through the times of rejoicing and mourning with his family, and in the twists and turns of his Christian pilgrimage. In the pages that follow, we will take a brief tour of this life, learning from his example and exploring his legacy for today.

¹ For summaries and expositions of these works, see the chapters in this volume by Mark Talbot and Sam Storms respectively.

² For a treatment of the recent literature on Edwards, see Sean Michael Lucas, “Jonathan Edwards Between Church and Academy: A Bibliographic Essay,” in *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards: American Religion and the Evangelical Tradition*, ed. D. G. Hart, Sean Michael Lucas, and Stephen J. Nichols (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2003), 228-247.

LAST OF THE PURITANS

On a Sabbath day in January 1758, Jonathan Edwards preached his farewell sermon to a band of Mohican and Mohawk Indians and to a handful of English families along the plains of the Housatonic River, snaking through the Berkshire Mountains on the western frontier of Massachusetts. Edwards had come to Stockbridge from his pastorate in Northampton, a post he had held for twenty-three years. He was now leaving for Princeton, New Jersey, where he would be installed as president of Princeton University, holding office in good health for only six weeks. The manuscript for the sermon that day consists of some mere outline points and a few sketchy sentences, only shadows of the full parting words for his Indian flock. In typical sermon style, he ends with a series of applications, saving his final comments for those who “have made it [their] call to live agreeable to the gospel.”³

Though hardly known, this sermon, and this line in particular, resonates deeply with that which is greatly known of his life. These comments serve not only as a fitting conclusion to his ministry at Stockbridge; they encompass the mission of his life. His first exposure to the gospel came in the parsonage of East Windsor, Connecticut, the home of Timothy Edwards and Esther Stoddard Edwards and their eleven children—Jonathan and his ten sisters. The Latin tutoring he received from his sisters, the love for reading his parents gave him that would only grow in the coming years, and his own omnivorous mind all fitted him to enter the recently established Yale University at twelve years of age. Graduating at the head of his class, he decided to stay at Yale in pursuit of a Master’s degree.⁴

After completing his course work, but prior to writing his thesis, Edwards, still a teenager, accepted a call to pastor a Presbyterian church in New York City, in the vicinity of modern-day Broad and Wall Streets. He meticulously prepared his sermons, sometimes writing out a single sermon as many as five times before preaching it. He also spent many mornings horseback riding along the banks of the Hudson River. It was

³ Jonathan Edwards, sermon manuscript on Hebrews 13:7-8 (1758), Beinecke Library, Yale University.

⁴ For fuller biographical information, see Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987); Stephen J. Nichols, *Jonathan Edwards: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2001); and George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003).

during these days that Edwards began writing his “Resolutions.” Eventually reaching seventy in number, these rules and guidelines for his life became his mission statement. A sampling reveals his discipline and his desire to live wholeheartedly for God:

52. I frequently hear persons in old age say how they would live if they were to live their lives over again. Resolved, that I will live just so I can think I shall wish I had done, supposing I live to old age.

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

70. Let there be something of benevolence in everything I speak.

The first resolution is even more instructive. Here Edwards commits his life to “do whatsoever I think to be most to God’s glory and to my own good, profit, and pleasure.” Here Edwards captures the vision of the first question and answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which declares that the “chief end of man” is to both “glorify God and enjoy him forever.” For Edwards, as for the Catechism, the two aims of God’s glory and one’s pleasure are in fact one and the same thing. What cannot be missed here is the centrality of this for Edwards’s life. It is no less remarkable that Edwards learned and lived this as a nineteen-year-old.⁵

By the summer of 1723, however, his church in New York no longer needed him. The church he pastored had come into being through a split. Largely through the counsel and preaching of Edwards, the two groups reconciled, and the offshoot returned, a testimony to both Edwards’s abilities and to his altruism, as helping them reconcile meant necessarily that he would be out of a job. He returned to New England, falling terribly ill and convalescing at home, during which time he finished his Master’s thesis, an original composition in Latin in keeping with the custom of his day.⁶

Edwards now faced a crucial decision. He had obvious gifts for the ministry, while equally suited for the life of the scholar and an academic

⁵ *Jonathan Edwards’ Resolutions and Advice to Young Converts*, ed. Stephen J. Nichols (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2001), 23-26, 17.

⁶ For his thesis, “A Sinner Is Not Justified in the Sight of God Except Through the Righteousness of Christ Obtained by Faith,” see *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 14, *Sermons and Discourses, 1723-1729*, ed. Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), 60-66.

career. He decided to stay at Yale as a tutor, or member of the faculty. The rector of the college, Samuel Johnson, had recently left Yale due to his surprising conversion to Anglicanism—tantamount to heresy for the Congregationalists—leaving Yale rather unstable and without any leadership. During his brief tenure (1724-1726), the young Edwards largely held Yale together and brought it through these troublesome times. His academic career, however, came to an end when he received a call to serve as the assistant minister to the aging Solomon Stoddard, Edwards's maternal grandfather, at Northampton, Massachusetts. Northampton was located north of Edwards's home along the Connecticut River. It had grown to be a prosperous and large town, with an equally prominent pulpit. One would have to go to Boston to find a larger colonial church in New England.

Stoddard's reputation matched that of the town and church. Dubbed "Pope of the Connecticut River Valley," Stoddard's influence was felt far beyond the valley and even far beyond his death. During this brief time of mentoring, Edwards learned a great deal. He learned of the "seasons of harvest," or the times of revival in the church. He learned to be a passionate preacher, aiming sermons at moving the whole person toward a greater understanding of God and living for him. These two things he inherited from his grandfather. He, and the church at Northampton, also inherited some things not so pleasant. Chief among them was Stoddard's practice of admitting all to the Lord's Supper. This would come to be the center of the controversy between Edwards and his people, and Edwards's rejection of the practice would eventuate in his dismissal.⁷ This was, however, many years over the horizon. Before the season of conflict came, he had many years of fruitful ministry at Northampton.

THE SEASONS OF MINISTRY AT NORTHAMPTON

Although it is quite difficult to summarize an eventful twenty-three-year ministry, some highlights stand out. First, there is Edwards's preaching of his sermon "God Glorified in the Work of Redemption" to the ministers gathered for the Harvard commencement in Boston in 1731. Edwards was not of the ranks of Harvard alumni; he had gone to Yale.

⁷ For a summary with contemporary application for today, see Mark Dever's chapter in this volume. For a full treatment of the "communion controversy" and of Edwards's writings on the issue, see *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 12, *Ecclesiastical Writings*, ed. David D. Hall (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994).

He was also the successor to Stoddard. And he was young—many ministers waited their whole life to be called upon to deliver such a sermon. All of this is to say that the expectations on Edwards were great, and also to say that the odds were not in his favor. The outcome, however, could not have been better, not because of Edwards, but because of his message.

In the sermon, Edwards annihilated the pretense that human beings merit or warrant or even contribute anything to salvation. Instead, salvation is exclusively the work of God—the Triune God, that is. Edwards declares:

We are dependent on Christ the son of God, as he is our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. We are dependent on the Father, who has given us Christ, and made him to be these things to us. We are dependent on the Holy Spirit, for it is of him that we are in Christ Jesus; it is the Spirit of God that gives faith in him. Whereby we receive him, and close [meet] with him.⁸

In this scheme of salvation, the creature is entirely dependent upon the Creator, and the redeemed give the glory to the Redeemer alone.

This view of salvation would be nothing new for Edwards's audience, which was well-versed in the Calvinistic tradition. Edwards, however, takes an intriguing next step. He makes the point that all of our good comes *from* God and comes to us *through* God. This encapsulates the blessings that are ours in salvation. But the chief blessing that we receive, our greatest good, comes to us *in* God. In other words, the greatest blessing that God gives us when he saves us is himself. Edwards puts it this way:

God himself is the great good which [the redeemed] are brought to the possession of and enjoyment of by redemption. He is the highest good and the sum of all good which Christ purchased. God is the inheritance of the saints; he is the portion of their souls. God is their wealth and treasure, their food, their life, their dwelling place, their ornament and diadem, and their everlasting honor and glory.⁹

⁸ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 17, *Sermons and Discourses, 1730-1733*, ed. Mark Valeri (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 201.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 208.

This preaching on the sovereignty of God in the work of redemption and on the sheer joy, delight, and pleasure of salvation was not contained in only one sermon of Edwards. It marked all of his preaching, eventually leading to new seasons of harvest and times of revival at Northampton. The first revival came in 1735-1737. During this time, not only Northampton but also churches along the Connecticut River experienced God at work in remarkable ways. Edwards described the experience in his own congregation:

Our public assemblies were then beautiful, the congregation was then alive in God's service, everyone earnestly intent on the public worship, every hearer eager to drink in the words of the minister as they came from his mouth; the assembly in general were, from time to time in tears while the Word was preached; some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors.¹⁰

The converts grew in number, and soon the congregation outgrew its building. And here the revival fervor became smothered by the selfish interests, scheming, and posturing among the members. The wealthy citizens of the town vied for the most prominent pews in the new meeting-house under construction. Factions and backbiting ensued, growing to such a pitch that Edwards addressed it in the sermon "Peaceful and Faithful Amid Division and Strife" in May 1737. Here he speaks of "the old iniquity of this town," meaning Northampton, which he identifies as "Contention and a party spirit." He continues, "People have not known how to manage scarce any public business without siding and dividing themselves into parties." Though a bit of hyperbole, this was unfortunately characteristic of both civil and ecclesiastical life in Northampton.¹¹

Edwards also notes the tragic consequence of the defaming of Christianity due to this contentious spirit, pointing out that "it has been very much taken notice of." This is especially the case since Northampton was so blessed of God through the few years prior to the time of revival. Edwards points out that while God "has most remark-

¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards, "A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4, *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1972), 151.

¹¹ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 19, *Sermons and Discourses, 1734-1738*, ed. M. X. Lesser (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), 670.

ably honored us by the great things he has done for us,” many in Northampton are “industriously stirr[ing] up strife.” This in miniature represents Edwards’s ministry at Northampton. As in Dickens’s novel, it, too, was the best of times and the worst of times. Yet, Edwards’s preaching changed little during these oscillations of trial and triumph, and his ideas remained markedly consistent throughout. As this sermon concludes, he calls upon those who are faithful and who live peaceably, even in the throes of contention, to be peacemakers, to pursue “the best interest of God’s people, [rather] than any private interest.”¹²

Eventually the parishioners at Northampton once again began taking their faith seriously, and once again revival came. But this time it moved far beyond the bounds of the Connecticut River Valley, reaching throughout New England and beyond to encompass the colonies. The Great Awakening, from roughly 1740-1742, coincided with the trips of George Whitefield to the colonies and, as with the earlier revival, the preaching of Edwards.

The sermon receiving the most attention is the famous “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Edwards preached this sermon the first time at Northampton with apparently little impact. A few months later, the occasion would arise for him to re-preach it, and this time the impact was legendary. Edwards was at Enfield, Connecticut, a healthy horse ride down the Connecticut River from Northampton. He wasn’t there to preach, but to be preached to. The intended minister, however, was too ill to preach, and Edwards just happened to have the sermon manuscript in his saddlebag.

The sermon is replete with imagery of God’s wrath for sinners. There is the famous spider dangling over a flame, hanging by a mere thread and vividly portraying our precarious position. A heavy lead weight sliding toward a bottomless gulf represents our inability to defer God’s judgment, and a bent bow makes us acutely aware of the imminence of God’s wrath. These are the images that have haunted readers ever since they first encountered the sermon in a high school American literature or history class. These images are what most people have when they hear of Edwards. Apologies for this dark side of Edwards are, however, not in order. For Edwards, the reality of hell’s torments and God’s wrath are the necessary corollaries to heaven’s beauty and God’s love.

¹² Ibid., 671-674, 663.

It is wrong, however, to caricature Edwards, as many do, as the consummate purveyor of hellfire and brimstone, incarnating the caricature of the Puritan as killjoy, the one who is always thinking and fearing that somewhere someone might just be having a good time.

This is certainly not the case in Edwards. One trips over the words *sweetness, beauty, happiness, joy, pleasure, excellency, and delight* throughout his writings. And even “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is no exception. In addition to the imagery of God’s wrath, there is also the imagery of God’s mercy. Consider this example: “Now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has flung the door of mercy wide open and stands in calling, and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners.”¹³

Many entered through that door of mercy that evening as they heard the sermon, and as the Awakening spread they were joined by countless others throughout the colonies. Because of Edwards’s involvement in these early revivals, he stands at the headwaters of the revivals and of the revivalism that significantly serves to shape the American religious identity. He is often called upon either as inspiration for revivals or as justification for them and the phenomenon they might spawn. Some of the associations might very well cause Edwards to balk, if not object altogether. To all of the revival movements, however, Edwards has something quite meaningful to say.

Edwards wrote much on revivals and revivalism, with his mature thought expressed in *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746), which was first a sermon series. In this work he explores the nature of affections, what may not necessarily count as true signs of religious affections, and what counts as true signs. The twelfth and final sign of genuine religious affections is given as the life that bears fruit. This is quite instructive given the context. Edwards witnessed incredible enthusiasm for Christ at the height of the Awakening. But then the commitment faded, leaving Edwards rather confused. For him, this was no mere academic issue. He was a pastor, and he had a deep and abiding concern for the spiritual state of those under his care. Edwards learned through this experience that the Christian life is not a sprint, but a marathon.¹⁴

¹³ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 22, *Sermons and Discourses, 1739-1742*, ed. Harry S. Stout and Nathan O. Hatch (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 416.

¹⁴ See *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1959), 383-461.

The revivalism approach to living the Christian life can tend to make it one that consists of fits and spurts. Edwards came to see that it was lived out, consistently, over the long haul. In the tradition of the Puritans, represented most strikingly in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Edwards viewed the Christian life as a pilgrimage, a journey of progress toward heaven. This approach emphasizes a consistent living out of the Christian faith in all aspects of life, and even, or perhaps especially, in the ordinary experiences of daily living. The revivalism mentality tends toward highs and lows, with not much to say to ordinary experiences. Edwards can inspire us to yearn for the work of God in our lives and in our churches. But he also can help us see that sometimes that happens without bells and whistles.

Despite these seasons of fruitful ministry, his tenure at Northampton ended on a bitter note. He sensed a growing lethargy toward the things of God among his parishioners. He also sensed that his pastoral authority was waning. In some ways, what happened to Edwards at Northampton was merely a symptom of larger shifts in New England culture. In previous generations, the church, geographically located at the center of town, was to be the center of one's life. By Edwards's day, the church and the pastor were becoming increasingly marginal in the life of New Englanders. Edwards's vision of God and of the community of saints allowed for no such marginalization. Consequently, when he asserted his pastoral authority, calling for deep levels of commitment by his congregation, he ran counter to many in the church. The issue seized upon was his discontinuation of the practice started by Stoddard of admitting all, even the unregenerate, to Communion. Edwards was in the right; nevertheless, he was voted out of his church on June 22, 1750.¹⁵

Much has been written on the controversy and dismissal. Here we might simply focus on Edwards's response. Surely it must have been a crushing blow. Not so much because of the embarrassment to Edwards—although certainly it was an embarrassing episode—but more because of his disappointment in his aim for the congregation at Northampton. Long before the controversy, he preached a sermon series on Paul's famous poem on love in 1 Corinthians 13, which

¹⁵ See Patricia J. Tracy, *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor: Religion and Society in Eighteenth-Century Northampton* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980).

Edwards entitled “Charity and Its Fruits.” The final installment in that series was the sermon, “Heaven Is a World of Love.” Here he extols the sublime beauty and glory of the life to come. But this for Edwards was no mere ethereal vision. For all of his talk of heaven and the world to come, he had a good fix on life here and now in this world. Consequently, Edwards puts forth the thesis that “as heaven is a world of love, so the way to heaven is the way of love.”¹⁶

What he longed for in his own life and in the lives of his congregation was that they would model this idea, living it out in their community. At times Edwards saw glimpses of it, and at times it even made more lasting manifestations. More often than not, however, his vision for his church went unrealized, as in the case of the late 1740s and in 1737 with the building of the new meetinghouse. We should not suppose Edwards to be naïve on this point. He knew of sin’s spoiling effects that continue both individually and communally after one comes to Christ. That, of course, is the difference between the communion of saints here and that of the life to come. Yet, Edwards did not abandon the idea that the journey to heaven should strive to reflect the destination.

Perhaps we get the impression that Edwards lived a rather charmed life, untouched by the vicissitudes of defeat and loss, conflict and hardship. That simply is not the case. His conflict at Northampton raged for years, and when he left there for Stockbridge, he also found himself embroiled in controversy. Eventually at both places he was vindicated. A deacon at Northampton later admitted that the leadership of the church was in the wrong and that the dismissal was unjust. That was after the fact, however. It would have been quite easy for Edwards to have deep resentment throughout these trials, perhaps even to abandon his call to ministry altogether, but he did not. He did not lessen his grasp of the belief that if heaven is a world of love, then the way to heaven is the way of love—he strengthened it.

MISSIONARY AT STOCKBRIDGE

Once dismissed, Edwards received numerous offers, including pastorates overseas, at Boston, and even at Northampton by a group of loyal mem-

¹⁶ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 396.

bers willing to start a new church. Edwards turned them all down, opting instead to head west. He went only forty miles, but the short distance could not mask the fact that he was literally moving to a new world. Stockbridge, Massachusetts, located on a beautiful plain along the Housatonic River and amidst the Berkshire Mountains, was the home of approximately 250 Mohicans, Mohawks, and Brothertons, as well as a dozen English families. It was a frontier mission post, only established a dozen years earlier. Prior Edwards scholarship viewed his time at Stockbridge as an exile and as a sabbatical during which he wrote his great treatises *Freedom of the Will*, *Original Sin*, and the posthumously published *Two Dissertations: Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* and *The Nature of True Virtue*. This is patently not the case. Edwards had a long-standing interest in Native Americans, as evidenced by his involvement on the board of trustees for Stockbridge and his editing and publishing of David Brainerd's journal. He also was very much involved in ministering to his flock of "Stockbridge Indians."¹⁷

One way this is seen is in his sermons. Edwards re-preached a number of sermons from earlier days once he got to Stockbridge. He also wrote many new ones. In all of them, he attempted to connect with his audience by making frequent allusions to nature—he often used such illustrations in his preaching, but here he increased the practice—and stating rather complicated matters in straightforward and clear prose. He preached a number of sermon series during this time, including treatments of the divine attributes, Christology and the deity and humanity of Christ, Revelation, the parables in Matthew 13, and, not surprisingly, the Lord's Supper. In the series on divine attributes, he included a sermon on God's mercy, which he likened to "a river that overflows all of its bounds."¹⁸ In a sermon for the Mohawks, he declared, "We invite you to come and enjoy the light of the Word of God, which is ten thousand times better than [the] light of the sun."¹⁹

The great themes in his treatises and previous sermons also find expression in the pulpit at Stockbridge. In a sermon on Hebrews 11:16,

¹⁷ For a fuller discussion, see Stephen J. Nichols, "Last of the Mohican Missionaries: Jonathan Edwards at Stockbridge," in *The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, 47-63.

¹⁸ Jonathan Edwards, sermon manuscript on Exodus 34:6-7 (January 1753), Beinecke Library, Yale University.

¹⁹ Jonathan Edwards, "To the Mohawks at the Treaty, August 16, 1751," in *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader*, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Douglas A. Sweeney (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 109.

Edwards extols the virtues of heaven, the better country to come, in prose and imagery that rivals “Heaven Is a World of Love,” though in outline format. Edwards explains that in heaven there is “no sin, no pride, no malice, [no] hating one another, no hurting one another, [no] killing one another . . . no death, no old age, no winter.” Positively, heaven is a place of peace and love, where “hearts are full of love” and “full of joy and happiness.”²⁰

Edwards also exhorted the Stockbridge Indians to live holy lives, reminding them in a sermon on 1 Peter 1:15 “that Christians are under special obligation to be universally holy in their lives.” By “universally holy” he meant that holiness should “extend itself to all God’s commands, all employment and persons, all conditions, and all time.”²¹ He also realized, however, that such holiness is a duty of delight. As he taught in his sermon on 1 John 5:3, “True love to God makes the duties he requires of us easy and delightful,” commending “the pleasure of communion with God.” This idea, he explains in the application, moves us from approaching “religion as a hard task” to seeing it as “our delight and pleasure.”²²

It is clear from his sermons that the appraisal of Gerald McDermott is right: Edwards “seems to have developed genuine affection for his Indian congregation.”²³ But even at Stockbridge, not all was smooth sailing. In addition to the Indians, Stockbridge was home to about a dozen English families. Chief among them was Colonel Ephraim Williams, of the ubiquitous Williams clan that appears throughout the Connecticut River Valley and that even gave Edwards difficulties at Northampton. Williams devoted his energies to acquiring land and wealth. He also oversaw the mission school, which was established at Stockbridge for the evangelization and education of Mohawks. Williams and his appointed schoolmaster Martin Kellogg, however, viewed the school as providing labor to work the land. This led to yet another drawn-out controversy as Edwards tried to wrest control of the school from Williams. Williams retaliated by boycotting the church and smearing Edwards’s name, even accusing him of embezzlement. In time, Edwards was fully

²⁰ Jonathan Edwards, sermon manuscript on Hebrews 11:16 (January 1754), Beinecke Library, Yale University.

²¹ Jonathan Edwards, sermon manuscript on 1 Peter 1:15 (n.d.), Beinecke Library, Yale University.

²² Jonathan Edwards, sermon manuscript on 1 John 5:3 (n.d.), Beinecke Library, Yale University.

²³ Gerald McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 203.

exonerated as Williams was shown to be embezzling funds and abusing his position. In the meantime, the disillusioned Mohawks left Stockbridge, leaving Edwards no choice but to close the school.

Here, as in Northampton, Edwards's ministry was one of highs and lows. He saw many converts and changed lives, while also experiencing the bitter root of controversy again. One example of his impact stands out in particular. Hendrick Aupaumut was most likely baptized by Edwards as an infant in 1757. Aupaumut was a hero in the Revolutionary War and a political leader of the Mohicans. He also was a spiritual leader, translating the Westminster Shorter Catechism into Mohican. Though the direct impact of Aupaumut is minimal at best, the indirect impact is great. Aupaumut wrote to Timothy Edwards, Jonathan's son who remained in Stockbridge after the family moved and presumably a friend of Aupaumut's, requesting copies of his father's books, wanting both *Freedom of the Will* and *Religious Affections*, testimony to Edwards's legacy among the Mohicans.²⁴

THE UNCOMMON UNION: THE EDWARDS FAMILY

Edwards's time at Stockbridge was followed by a quite brief tenure as president of Princeton. He left Stockbridge in January, beginning his presidential duties later that month. Around the beginning of March, he took a smallpox inoculation, developed pneumonia, suffered intensely for about two weeks, and died on March 22, 1758. Perhaps the saddest element of this tragic episode is that at the time of his death Edwards was separated from his wife, Sarah. He had made the move to Princeton in the middle of winter. Given the difficulties of the travel, and also to allow Sarah to sell property and settle some financial affairs, it was decided that he would go ahead to Princeton and settle the home there and they would reunite in the spring. When they parted in January, it was the last time they were to see each other on earth. In now famous last words, his thoughts drifted toward Sarah as he said, dictating a letter to his daughter Lucy, "Give my kindest love to my dear wife, and tell her that the uncommon union, which has so long subsisted between us, has been such a nature as I trust is spiritual and so will continue for ever."²⁵

²⁴ Hendrick Aupaumut to Timothy Edwards (1775), Stockbridge Historical Room, Stockbridge, Mass.

²⁵ See Heidi L. Nichols, "Those Exceptional Edwards Women," *Christian History* 22 (2003): 23-25. For more on Sarah and their relationship, see Noël Piper's essay in this volume.

Edwards had first met Sarah while he was a student at Yale in New Haven. Her father was a minister and a founding trustee of the college. From the first moment Jonathan met her, he was enraptured by her grace and elegance and charm, and also by her model spirituality. Through the years he surely kept up on the life of Sarah Pierpont, and he married her four years after he began his pastoral charge at Northampton. Like his own family at East Windsor, he and Sarah had eleven children of their own. He looked to Sarah to keep this bustling home together. Once, while Sarah was on a trip to Boston and Jonathan was left tending the family, he wrote a letter to his wife, informing her that the two oldest daughters were sick, adding, "We have been without you almost as long as we know how to be."²⁶

Like other families of the colonial era, the Edwardses were no strangers to tragedy and difficulty. Though all of their children lived past infancy, not all of them survived their parents. Edwards preached the funeral sermon for his daughter Jerusha, who likely contracted tuberculosis while caring for the dying David Brainerd. Another daughter, Esther, lost her husband Aaron Burr, and there were the sad occurrences of the deaths of grandchildren. Further, Edwards, though it is hard for us as contemporary readers to think of this, lived on the frontier and faced the accompanying threat of Indian invasions. Distant relatives were taken captive, and at times both at Northampton and especially at Stockbridge tension ran high. One letter to Esther Edwards Burr from her father finds the family sheltered in a fort.

There were trying days, and there were days of celebration. Sometimes it was the challenges that provided for rich adventure in the Edwards home. When the family moved to Stockbridge, Jonathan Edwards, Jr., was just a boy. He played alongside the Mohicans and Mohawks, learning Mohican as he learned English. Later in his life he would become quite an advocate for Native Americans, even warranting the praise of George Washington. All visitors, and there were many, to the Edwards home commented on the grace of the hosts and the union of the family. Edwards, according to the custom for ministerial preparation in those days, also housed apprentices for the ministry in his home. This generation of ministers had a profound impact on New

²⁶ Jonathan Edwards to Sarah Pierpont Edwards (June 22, 1748), *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 16, *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 247.

England. And before them, Edwards and his family lived out their faith in full view.

His hope for his family was the same as that for the congregations to which he ministered. Summed up best in a letter to his daughter Sarah when she was twelve years old and visiting relatives, Edwards writes, “I wish you much of the presence of Christ and communion with him, and that you might live so as to give him honor in [the] place where you are by an amiable behavior towards all.”²⁷ When another daughter, Mary, was away in New Hampshire, Edwards took the occasion to remind her of God’s care: “Though you are at so great distance from us, yet God is everywhere. You are much out of the reach of our care, but you are every moment in his hands. We have not the comfort of seeing you, but he sees you. His eye is always upon you.”²⁸

That his children learned this can be seen in some correspondence with his daughter, Esther Edwards Burr. Shortly after the death of her husband, her infant son, Aaron Burr, Jr., later to become America’s third vice president, fell sick, being “brought to the Brink of the Grave.” This was an intense time of suffering in Esther’s life. No sooner had she finished writing to her mother about how God was comforting her at the loss of her husband, she took up the quill to write to her father of her “new tryals.” In the letter, however, she reveals her deep resolve of faith in God, boldly claiming, “Altho all streams were cut off yet so long as my God lives I have enough—He enabled me to say altho’ thou slay me yet will I trust in thee.” She can declare, “O how good is God,” she can say, “I saw the fullness there was in Christ,” and she can testify that “a kind and gracious God h[as] been with me in six Troubles and in seven.”²⁹ Her father had this to say in his response:

Indeed, he is a faithful God; he will remember his covenant forever; and never will fail them that trust in him. But don’t be surprised, or think some strange thing has happened to you, if after this light, clouds of darkness should return. Perpetual sunshine is not usual in this world, even to God’s true saints. But I hope, if God should hide his face in

²⁷ Jonathan Edwards to Sarah Edwards (June 25, 1741), *WJE*, 16:96.

²⁸ Jonathan Edwards to Mary Edwards (July 26, 1749), *WJE*, 16:289.

²⁹ Esther Edwards Burr to Jonathan Edwards (November 2, 1757), *The Journal of Esther Edwards Burr, 1754-1757*, ed. Carol F. Karlsen and Laurie Crumpacker (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), 295-296.

some respect, even this will be in faithfulness to you, to purify you, and fit you for further and better light.³⁰

Perhaps Esther Edwards Burr's response to these times of trial in her life represents the true legacy of Edwards's ministry.

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS: EDWARDS'S LEGACY

Many themes emerge from the life and thought of Edwards, and all of them provide for a rich legacy. Peter Thuesen once referred to Edwards as a "great mirror," intending to capture the notion that there is a breadth to Edwards's work that provides scholars and others from many different fields rich opportunities to see and reflect a variety of elements.³¹ And that is certainly true as Edwards's literary remains abound. Amidst all of this material, some central themes and emphases shine through, calling for our attention as we contemplate Edwards's legacy for the church today.

His extensive and thorough understanding of the gospel, for one, compels attention. Edwards begins with a vision of the holiness and wrath of God, coupled with his infinite love and mercy as seen in the cross, then moves to portray vividly and powerfully humanity's desperate plight and utter need of a savior. He thoughtfully balances both a deep and abiding sense of our sin and lowliness alongside the exaltation of joy in Christ and delight in God. This approach serves well as an antidote to the often anemic and shallow presentations of the gospel today.

Secondly, we could learn from the example of his well-trained eye to see the beauty of God in nature and to see God at work both in the Word and in the world. This led Edwards to view his engagement of the world in an entirely new way. He could learn of God in the Bible, to be sure, but as he watched the flying spider, for instance, he could see something of the pleasure of God, and as he rode through the picturesque Connecticut River Valley he marveled at God's creativity and goodness. As George Marsden, commenting on this comprehensive vision of Edwards, observes, "The key to Edwards' thought is that everything is related because everything is

³⁰ Jonathan Edwards to Esther Edwards Burr (November 20, 1757), *WJE*, 16:730.

³¹ Peter J. Thuesen, "Jonathan Edwards as Great Mirror," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50 (1997): 39-60.

related to God.”³² Seeing the world this way brings new perspective to the Christian at work, enjoying nature, participating in the arts, and engaging culture.

Finally, Edwards, unlike any other, gracefully portrays life as relishing in the gifts and world of the Triune God, heralding that ultimately we find true fulfillment in relishing God himself. This last point is worth exploring in depth.

Somewhat endemic to American identity is the pursuit of happiness. Enshrined by Thomas Jefferson, these words and what they mean are often the talk of American historians, and in many ways are often the goal of American citizens. Happiness and its pursuit was of no less interest to Edwards. He differed quite a bit from his contemporaries, however. Most notable in this regard is Benjamin Franklin, one of the key shapers of the meaning of those words. In Franklin’s hands, the pursuit of happiness largely came to mean self-fulfillment accomplished through self-reliance. Of course, Franklin advocated public virtue and the common good as well. But his aphorisms in the quite popular *Poor Richard’s Almanac* and his own *Autobiography* point to a certain self-centeredness in Franklin’s pursuit. “Early to bed, early to rise, makes one healthy, wealthy, and wise,” illustrates the point.

Edwards could not disagree more. Rather than seeing self-centeredness as the goal achieved through self-reliance, Edwards advocated God-centeredness achieved through dependence on him. There is, however, a great irony here. The irony is summed up in Christ’s words: “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:39). To state the irony directly, self-centeredness through self-reliance leads to self-defeat, in the truest and fullest sense possible. When, however, God is at the center, the self is most realized, most fulfilled, and most happy.

It is worth noting that Edwards emphasized, as well, God-dependence over self-dependence. Again it was Franklin who said, “God helps those who help themselves.” Through such statements, self-reliance has become a distinctly American ideal, and American evangelicalism is not necessarily immune from its effects. Conversely, Edwards sees us as helpless, standing before God entirely empty-handed. His emphasis on the sovereignty of God caused him to exalt God in the

³² Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 460.

work of redemption and in sanctification, to come to him and to live for him only through dependence upon him. This crucial aspect of Edwards's legacy is worth remembering.

Edwards has a different definition of happiness and a different means by which it is achieved than Franklin and most pursuers of the American dream. He also knows that these differences lead to different objects that fill out that definition and mark the pursuit. In his sermon "Heaven Is a World of Love," he notes that the pleasures of heaven are not just for heaven; they are to be enjoyed now. Consequently, he admonishes that our desires "must be taken off the pleasure of this world."³³ This is not deprivation. Edwards simply does not want our desires to be so small as to cause us to miss the true happiness and pleasure of what God has for us both now and in the world to come.

Edwards longed for his parishioners at Northampton and Stockbridge and for his family and for himself to be "happified" in and through Christ, a word that only he could coin, and a word that he truly spent his life in pursuit of. Sometimes that happiness came in times of triumph. Sometimes it came to him on the anvil of suffering, conflict, and hardship. But in all aspects of this remarkable life we see the legacy of God glorified and enjoyed forever, which is still instructive 300 years later and hopefully for years to come.

³³ Edwards, "Heaven Is a World of Love," *WJE*, 8:394.

SARAH EDWARDS: JONATHAN'S HOME AND HAVEN

Noël Piper

We are interested in Jonathan Edwards because of his influence on our way of understanding the world and seeing God. Of course, that makes us curious about his wife, Sarah. But I'd be wasting our time if I were satisfied just to dig around for interesting tidbits. So I pray that this biography and our time in it will be biblical and will be for our edification and encouragement.

Biography *is* important, and the book of Hebrews is a good place to remind ourselves of that. Perhaps 13:7-8, in particular, can help us read with clearer purpose the story of a saint, of one who leads us in our faith.

*Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God.
Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus
Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*

Remember. Consider. Imitate. We should never think that we can't be a saint like Sarah Edwards. I expect that Sarah Edwards would be the first to tell us that she isn't great. She would tell us she has a great God—the same God we have. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Let us look for him as we consider Sarah's story.

THE BACKDROP

For the sake of context, let's remember that Jonathan and Sarah's whole lives were lived in the colonies of the New World—*colonies*, not one country. Thirteen small British colonies hugged the Atlantic coast. And a vast western wilderness stretched who knew how far into the unknown.

New *England* and the other colonies were Britain's fragile fingertip grasp on the edge of the continent. The colonists were British citizens surrounded by territories of other nations. Florida and the Southwest were Spain's. The Louisiana Territory was France's. The French, in particular, were eager to ally themselves with local Indians against the British. Today the Edwards story should elicit the sight of garrisons on hilltops, the sounds of shots in the distance, the discomfort of soldiers billeting in their homes, the shock and terror of news about massacres in nearby settlements. This was the backdrop, to a greater or lesser degree, throughout much of their lives.

THE COURTSHIP OF JONATHAN EDWARDS AND SARAH PIERREPONT

In 1723, at age nineteen, Jonathan had already graduated from Yale and had been a pastor in New York for a year. When his time in that church ended, he accepted a job at Yale and returned to New Haven where Sarah Pierrepont lived. It's possible that Jonathan had been aware of her for three or four years, since his student days at Yale. In those student days, when he was about sixteen, he probably would have seen her when he attended New Haven's First Church where her father had been pastor until his death in 1714.¹

Now, on his return in 1723, Jonathan was twenty and Sarah was thirteen. It was not unusual for girls to be married by about sixteen.

As this school term's work began for him, it seems he may have been somewhat distracted from his usual studiousness. A familiar story finds him daydreaming over his Greek grammar book, which he probably intended to be studying to prepare to teach. Instead we find now on the front page of that grammar book a record of his real thoughts.

They say there is a young lady in [New Haven] who is loved of that Great Being, who made and rules the world, and that there are certain seasons in which this Great Being, in some way or other invisible, comes to her and fills her mind with exceeding sweet delight; and that she hardly cares for anything, except to meditate on Him. . . . [Y]ou could not persuade her to do any thing wrong or sinful, if you would give her all the world, lest she should offend this Great Being. She is of

¹ Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 91.

a wonderful sweetness, calmness, and universal benevolence of mind; especially after this Great God has manifested himself to her mind. She will sometimes go about from place to place, singing sweetly; and seems to be always full of joy and pleasure. . . . She loves to be alone, walking in the fields and groves, and seems to have some one invisible always conversing with her.²

All the biographers mention the contrast between the two of them. Sarah was from one of the most distinguished families in Connecticut. Her education had been the best a woman of that era typically received. She was accomplished in the social skills of polite society. She enjoyed music and perhaps knew how to play the lute. (In the year of their marriage, one of the shopping reminders for Jonathan when he traveled was to pick up lute strings.³ That may have been for a wedding musician, or it may have been for Sarah herself.) People who knew her mentioned her beauty and her way of putting people at ease. Samuel Hopkins, who knew her later, stressed her “peculiar loveliness of expression, the combined result of goodness and intelligence.”⁴

Jonathan, on the other hand, was introverted, shy, and uneasy with small talk. He had entered college at thirteen, and graduated valedictorian. He ate sparingly in an age of groaning dining tables, and he was not a drinker. He was tall and gangly and awkwardly different. He was *not* full of social graces. He wrote in his journal: “A virtue which I need in a higher degree is gentleness. If I had more of an air of gentleness, I should be much mended.”⁵ (In that time, *gentleness* meant “appropriate social grace,” as we use the word today in *gentleman*.)

One thing they had in common was a love for music. He pictured music as the most nearly perfect way for people to communicate with each other.

² Quoted in *ibid.*, 92.

³ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 110.

⁴ Quoted in Elisabeth D. Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man: The Uncommon Union of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards* (Laurel, Miss.: Audubon Press, 2003), 15. In the writing of this short biography of Sarah Edwards, I am indebted especially to Dodds's book. I have known this work so long, it is possible that I sometimes have incorporated its thought without appropriate footnote references. I realize there are weaknesses in Dodds's presentation (see my Foreword to the 2003 edition of *Marriage to a Difficult Man*). So I do recommend that interested readers go to Marsden's *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* and Murray's *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* for more careful chronology, theological interpretation, and understanding of the man who so shaped Sarah's life and was so affected by Sarah.

⁵ Quoted in Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, 17.

The best, most beautiful, and most perfect way that we have of expressing a sweet concord of mind to each other, is by music. When I would form in my mind an idea of a society in the highest degree happy, I think of them as expressing their love, their joy, and the inward concord and harmony and spiritual beauty of their souls by sweetly singing to each other.⁶

That imagery was just the first thought-step into a leap from human realities to heavenly realities, where he saw sweet human intimacy as only a simple ditty compared to the symphony of harmonies of intimacy with God.

As Sarah grew older, and Jonathan grew somewhat mellowed, they began to spend more time together. They enjoyed walking and talking together, and he apparently found in her a mind that matched her beauty. In fact, she introduced him to a book she owned by Peter van Maastricht, a book that later was influential in his thinking about the Covenant.⁷ They became engaged in the spring of 1725.

Jonathan was a man whose nature was to bear uncertainties in thought and theology as if they were physical stress. The years of waiting until Sarah was old enough to marry must have added even greater pressure. Here are some words he used to describe himself, from a couple of weeks of his journal in 1725, a year and a half before they would marry:

December 29	Dull and lifeless
January 9	Decayed
January 10	Recovering ⁸

Perhaps it was his emotions for Sarah that sometimes caused him to fear sinning with his mind. In an effort to remain pure, he resolved, "When I am violently beset with temptation or cannot rid myself of evil thoughts, to do some sum in arithmetic or geometry or some other study, which necessarily *engages all my thoughts* and unavoidably keeps them from wandering."⁹

⁶ Quoted in Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 106.

⁷ Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, 21. (Dodds spelled the name as Peter Maastricht.)

⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 19.

⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*

THE BEGINNINGS OF THEIR MARRIED LIFE

Jonathan Edwards and Sarah Pierrepont were finally married on July 28, 1727. She was seventeen. He was twenty-four. He wore a new powdered wig and a new set of white clerical bands given him by his sister Mary. Sarah wore a boldly-patterned green satin brocade.¹⁰

We get only glimmers and glimpses into the heart of their love and passion. One time, for instance, Jonathan used the love of a man and a woman as an illustration of our limited grasp of another person's love toward God. "When we have the idea of another's love to a thing, if it be the love of a man to a woman . . . we have not generally any further idea at all of his love, we only have an idea of his *actions* that are the *effects* of love. . . . We have a faint, vanishing notion of their *affections*."¹¹

Jonathan had become the pastor in Northampton, following in the footsteps of his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard. He began there in February 1757, just five months before their wedding in New Haven.

Sarah could not slip unnoticed into Northampton. Based on the customs of the time, Elisabeth Dodds imagines Sarah's arrival in the Northampton church:

Any beautiful newcomer in a small town was a curio, but when she was also the wife of the new minister, she caused intense interest. The rigid seating charts of churches at that time marked a minister's family as effectively as if a flag flew over the pew. . . . So every eye in town was on Sarah as she swished in wearing her wedding dress.

Custom commanded that a bride on her first Sunday in church wear her wedding dress and turn slowly so everyone could have a good look at it. Brides also had the privilege of choosing the text for the first Sunday after their wedding. There is no record of the text Sarah chose, but her favorite verse was "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Rom 8:35), and it is possible that she chose to hear that one expounded.

She took her place in the seat that was to symbolize her role—a high bench facing the congregation, where everyone could notice the least flicker of expression. Sarah had been prepared for this exposed position every Sunday of her childhood on the leafy common of New

¹⁰ Ibid., 22.

¹¹ Ibid.

Haven, but it was different to be, herself, the Minister's Wife. Other women could yawn or furtively twitch a numbed foot in the cold of a January morning in an unheated building. Never she.¹²

Marsden says, "By fall 1727 [about three months after the wedding] Jonathan had dramatically recovered his spiritual bearings, specifically his ability to find the spiritual intensity he had lost for three years."¹³

What made the difference? Perhaps he was better fitted for a church situation than for the academic setting at Yale. In addition, it seems likely to me that the recovery was closely related to their marriage. For at least three years prior to this, in addition to his rigorous academic pursuits, he had also been restraining himself sexually and yearning for the day when he and Sarah would be one. When their life together began, he was like a new man. He had found his earthly home and haven.

And as Sarah stepped into this role of wife, she freed him to pursue the philosophical, scientific, and theological wrestlings that made him the man we honor.

Edwards was a man to whom people reacted. He was different. He was intense. His moral force was a threat to people who settled for routine. After he'd thought through the biblical truth and implications of a theological or church issue, he didn't back down from what he'd discovered.

For instance, he came to realize that only believers should take Communion in the church. The Northampton church was not happy when he went against the easier standards of his grandfather who had allowed Communion even for unbelievers if they weren't participating in obvious sin.¹⁴ This kind of controversy meant that Sarah, in the background, was also twisted and bumped by the opposition that he faced.

He was a thinker who held ideas in his mind, mulling them over, taking them apart and putting them together with other ideas, and testing them against other parts of God's truth. Such a man reaches the heights when those separate ideas come together into a larger truth. But he also is the kind of man who can slide into deep pits on the way to a truth.¹⁵

A man like that is not easy to live with. But Sarah found ways to

¹² Ibid., 25.

¹³ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 111.

¹⁴ For more on this, see Mark Dever's chapter in this volume.

¹⁵ Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, 57.

make a happy home for him. She made him sure of her steady love, and then she created an environment and routine where he was free to think. She learned that when he was caught up in a thought, he didn't want to be interrupted for dinner. She learned that his moods were intense. He wrote in his journal: "I have had very affecting views of my own sinfulness and vileness; very frequently to such a degree as to hold me in a kind of loud weeping . . . so that I have often been forced to shut myself up."¹⁶

The town saw a composed man. Sarah knew what storms there were inside him. She knew the at-home Jonathan.

Samuel Hopkins wrote:

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; accounting it her greatest glory and there wherein she *could best serve God and her generation* [and ours, we might add], *to be the means in this way of promoting his usefulness and happiness.*¹⁷

So life in the Edwards house was shaped in large degree by Jonathan's calling. One of his journal entries said, "I think Christ has recommended rising early in the morning by his rising from the grave very early."¹⁸ So it was Jonathan's habit to awake early. The family's routine through the years was to wake early with him, to hear a chapter from the Bible by candlelight, and to pray for God's blessing on the day ahead.

It was his habit to do physical labor sometime each day for exercise—for instance, chopping wood, mending fences, or working in the garden. But Sarah had *most* of the responsibility for overseeing the care of the property.

Often he was in his study for thirteen hours a day. This included lots of preparation for Sundays and for Bible teaching. But it also included the times when Sarah came in to visit and talk or when parishioners stopped by for prayer or counsel.

In the evening the two of them might ride into the woods for exer-

¹⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 31.

¹⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, 29-30 (emphasis added).

¹⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 28.

cise and fresh air and to talk. And in the evening they would pray together again.

THE GROWING FAMILY

Beginning on August 25, 1728, children came into the family—eleven in all—at about two-year intervals: Sarah, Jerusha, Esther, Mary, Lucy, Timothy, Susannah, Eunice, Jonathan, Elizabeth, and Pierpont.¹⁹ This was the beginning of Sarah's next great role, that of mother.

In 1900 A. E. Winship made a study contrasting two families. One had hundreds of descendants who were a drain on society. The other, descendants of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards, were outstanding for their contributions to society. He wrote of the Edwards clan:

Whatever the family has done, it has done ably and nobly. . . . And much of the capacity and talent, intelligence and character of the more than 1400 of the Edwards family is due to Mrs. Edwards.

By 1900 when Winship made his study, this marriage had produced:

- thirteen college presidents
- sixty-five professors
- 100 lawyers and a dean of a law school
- thirty judges
- sixty-six physicians and a dean of a medical school
- eighty holders of public office, including:
 - three U.S. senators
 - mayors of three large cities
 - governors of three states
 - a vice president of the U.S.
 - a controller of the U.S. Treasury

Members of the family wrote 135 books. . . . edited 18 journals and periodicals. They entered the ministry in platoons and sent one hundred missionaries overseas, as well as stocking many mission boards with lay trustees.²⁰

¹⁹ Pierpont's name was spelled different than Sarah's maiden name. Standardized spelling hadn't become common yet.

²⁰ Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, 31-32.

Winship goes on to list kinds of institutions, industries, and businesses that have been owned or directed by Edwards's descendants. "There is scarcely a Great American industry that has not had one of this family among its chief promoters." We might well ask with Elisabeth Dodds, "Has any other mother contributed more vitally to the leadership of a nation?"²¹

Six of the Edwards children were born on Sundays. At that time some ministers wouldn't baptize babies born on Sundays, because they believed babies were born on the day of the week on which they had been conceived, and that wasn't deemed an appropriate Sabbath activity.

All of the Edwards children lived at least into adolescence. That was amazing in an era when death was always very close, and at times there was resentment among other families.

THE HOUSEHOLD

In our centrally-heated houses, it's difficult to imagine the tasks that were Sarah's to do or delegate: breaking ice to haul water, bringing in firewood and tending the fire, cooking and packing lunches for visiting travelers, making the family's clothing (from sheep-shearing to spinning and weaving to sewing), growing and preserving produce, making brooms, doing laundry, tending babies and nursing illnesses, making candles, feeding poultry and produce, overseeing butchering, teaching the boys whatever they didn't learn at school, and seeing that the girls learned homemaking creativity. That's only a fraction of that for which she was responsible.

How could she have known the gift she was giving *us* as she freed Jonathan to fulfill his calling?

Once when Sarah was out of town and Jonathan was in charge, he wrote almost desperately, "We have been without you almost as long as we know how to be."²²

Much of what we know about the inner workings of the Edwards family comes from Samuel Hopkins, who lived with them for a while. He wrote:

²¹ Ibid., 32.

²² Quoted in Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 323.

She had an excellent way of governing her children; she knew how to make them regard and obey her cheerfully, without loud angry words, much less heavy blows. . . . If any correction was necessary, she did not administer it in a passion; and when she had occasion to reprove and rebuke she would do it in few words, without warmth [that is, vehemence] and noise. . . .

Her system of discipline was begun at a very early age and it was her rule to resist the first, as well as every subsequent exhibition of temper or disobedience in the child . . . wisely reflecting that until a child will obey his parents he can never be brought to obey God.²³

Their children were eleven different people, proving that Sarah's discipline did not squash their personalities—perhaps because an important aspect of their disciplined life was that, as Samuel Hopkins wrote, “for [her children] she constantly and earnestly prayed and bore them on her heart before God . . . and that even before they were born.”²⁴

Dodds says:

Sarah's way with their children did more for Edwards than shield him from hullabaloo while he studied. The family gave him incarnate foundation for his ethic. . . . The last Sunday [Edwards] stood in the Northampton pulpit as pastor of the church he put in this word for his people: “Every family ought to be . . . a little church, consecrated to Christ and wholly influenced and governed by His rules. And family education and order are some of the chief means of grace. If these fail, all other means are like to prove ineffectual.”²⁵

As vital as Sarah's role was, we mustn't picture her raising the children alone. Jonathan and Sarah's affection for each other and the regular family devotional routine were strong blocks in the children's foundation. And Jonathan played an integral part in their lives. When they were old enough, he would often take one or another along when he traveled. At home, Sarah knew Jonathan would give one hour every day to the children. Hopkins describes his “entering freely into the feelings and concerns of his children and relaxing into cheerful and animate conversation accompanied frequently with sprightly remarks

²³ Quoted in Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, 35-36.

²⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, 37.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

and sallies of wit and humor . . . then he went back to his study for more work before dinner."²⁶ This was a different man than the parish usually saw.

It is possible to piece together a lot about the Edwards household because they were paper savers. Paper was expensive and had to be ordered from Boston. So Jonathan saved old bills, shopping lists, and first drafts of letters to stitch together into small books, using the blank side for sermon writing. Since his sermons were saved, this record of everyday, sometimes almost modern details was saved as well. For instance, many of the shopping lists included a reminder to buy chocolate.²⁷

It was understood by travelers in that colonial time that if a town had no inn or if the inn was unsavory, the parson's house was a welcoming overnight place. So from the beginning in Northampton, Sarah exercised her gifts of hospitality. Their home was well-known, busy, and praised.

THE WIDER SPHERE OF INFLUENCE

Sarah was not only mother and wife and hostess—she also felt spiritual responsibility for those who entered her house. A long line of young apprentice pastors showed up on their doorstep over the years, hoping to live with them and soak up experience from Jonathan. That's why Samuel Hopkins was living with them and had the occasion to observe their family. He arrived at the Edwards home in December 1741. Here's his account of the welcome he received.

When I arrived there, Mr. Edwards was not at home, but I was received with great kindness by Mrs. Edwards and the family and had encouragement that I might live there during the winter. . . . I was very gloomy and was most of the time retired in my chamber. After some days, Mrs. Edwards came . . . and said as I was now become a member of the family for a season, she felt herself interested in my welfare and as she observed that I appeared gloomy and dejected, she hoped I would not think she intruded [by] her desiring to know and asking me what was the occasion of it. . . . I told her . . . I was in a Christless, graceless state . . . upon which we entered into a free conversation and

²⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 40.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 38; Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703-1758: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), 136.

. . . she told me that she had [prayed] respecting me since I had been in the family; that she trusted I should receive light and comfort and doubted not that God intended yet to do great things by me.²⁸

Sarah had seven children at the time—ages thirteen down to one and a half—and yet she also took this young man under her wing and encouraged him. He remembered it all his life.

The impact of Sarah Edwards's assurance in God's working did not stop in that personal conversation. Hopkins went on to become a pastor in Newport, Rhode Island, a town dependent on the slave economy. He raised a strong voice against it, even though many were offended. But one young man was impressed. William Ellery Channing had been adrift till then, looking for purpose in his life. He had long talks with Hopkins, went back to Boston, became a pastor who influenced Emerson and Thoreau, and had a large part in the abolitionist movement.²⁹

We all have quiet conversations that might be forgotten. Sarah's with Samuel would have been forgotten except for Hopkins's journal. Their talk was part of a chain that led onward at least as far as Emerson and Thoreau, and *that* certainly wasn't the end of it—we just don't have the records of what happened next, and next, and next. We usually *don't* know how God winds the threads of our lives on and on and on.

Hopkins obviously admired Sarah Edwards. He wrote that "she made it her rule to speak well of all, so far as she could with truth and justice to herself and others. . . ." This sounds a lot like Jonathan's early flyleaf musings about Sarah—confirmation that he hadn't been blinded by love.

When Hopkins watched the relationship between Jonathan and Sarah he saw that:

In the midst of these complicated labors . . . [Edwards] found at home one who was in every sense a help mate for him, one who made their common dwelling the abode of order and neatness, of peace and comfort, of harmony and love, to all its inmates, and of kindness and hospitality to the friend, the visitant, and the stranger.³⁰

²⁸ Quoted in Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, 50.

²⁹ This chain of influence is described by Dodds in *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, 50-51.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

Another person who observed the Edwards family was George Whitefield, when he visited America during the Awakening. He came to Northampton for a weekend in October 1740 and preached four times. Also, on Saturday morning he spoke to the Edwards children in their home. Whitefield wrote that when he preached on Sunday morning, Jonathan wept during almost the whole service. The Edwards family had a great effect on Whitefield as well:

Felt wonderful satisfaction in being at the house of Mr. Edwards. He is a Son himself, and hath also a Daughter of Abraham for his wife. A sweeter couple I have not yet seen. Their children were dressed not in silks and satins, but plain, as becomes the children of those who, in all things ought to be examples of Christian simplicity. She is a woman adorned with a meek and quiet spirit, talked feelingly and solidly of the Things of God, and seemed to be such a help meet for her husband, that she caused me to renew those prayers, which, for many months, I have put up to God, that he would be pleased to send me a daughter of Abraham to be my wife.³¹

The next year Whitefield married a widow whom John Wesley described as a “woman of candour and humanity.”³²

THE SPIRITUAL TURNING POINT

The second phase of the Awakening crested in the spring and summer of 1741, the same time Jonathan was asking the church for a set salary due to the financial demands of his large family. This caused the parish to watch very closely the lifestyle of the Edwards family, to be on the lookout for extravagance. A salary committee of the church ruled that Sarah had to keep an itemized statement of all expenditures.

In January 1742 we come to an event in Sarah's life that was a turning point for her. Our efforts to understand this period remind us of the difficult task a biographer has in trying to record fairly a person's life, and how hard it can be to evaluate what you read in biography or history.

An obvious problem arises when a biographer's worldview makes him blind to important aspects of his subject's life. Iain Murray sees this problem when he takes note of prominent Edwards biographers and

³¹ Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703-1758*, 188.

³² Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, 74-75.

observes that Ola Winslow (1940) rejected Edwards's theology and that later, in Perry Miller (1949), "anti-supernatural animus comes to its fullest expression."³³

It's amazing to think that someone could write a highly-acclaimed biography of Edwards that lauds his philosophy but rejects his view of God and anything supernatural. And then, from our perspective as readers, what if that lopsided view were *all* we knew about Edwards? That's the challenge for a biography reader—trying to find and recognize a well-balanced approach.

In January 1742 Sarah underwent a crisis that is approached very differently by different biographers, leaving us with the challenge of trying to understand what really happened.

Winslow, who rejected Edwards's theology, used the account of Sarah's experience to minimize the impact of Jonathan's acceptance of outward, active manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Winslow wrote, "The fact that his wife was given to these more extreme manifestations no doubt inclined him to a more hospitable attitude toward them. . . ."³⁴ The implication seems to be that under normal circumstances he would have been less accepting of such "enthusiasm," but his perception was skewed by having to account for Sarah's experience.

Miller, who rejected the idea of anything supernatural, could only conclude that Sarah's story provided Jonathan with a proof-case to use against those who thought "enthusiasm" was from Satan. Miller's implication seems to be that although we modern people know such manifestations couldn't really be supernatural, Edwards was old-fashioned and mistakenly thought something supernatural was going on. So, Miller might say, it was convenient for Edwards to have an experience at hand to try to use as proof against doubters.³⁵

Dodds describes Sarah as "limply needful, grotesque—jabbering, hallucinating, idiotically fainting."³⁶ She calls it a breaking point and attributes it to Sarah's previous stoicism, her coping with her difficult husband and many children, the financial stresses, Jonathan's criticism of her handling of a certain person, and her jealousy over the success of

³³ Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, xxix.

³⁴ Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards, 1703-1758*, 205.

³⁵ Miller's attitude colors his recounting of this event: Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: W. Sloane Associates, 1949), 203-206.

³⁶ Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, 81. Dodds describes Sarah's experience in chapter 8.

a visiting pastor while Jonathan was away from home. Dodds says we can't know if it was a religious transport or a nervous breakdown.³⁷

Over against all these interpretations stands Sarah's own account of this time. She speaks unambiguously of the experience as a spiritual encounter.

What really happened? We would be wise to hear some of Sarah's own words, as transcribed by Jonathan. He published her account in "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion."³⁸ For privacy's sake, he didn't reveal her name or gender.

The soul dwelt on high, was lost in God, and seemed almost to leave the body. The mind dwelt in a pure delight that fed and satisfied it; enjoying pleasure without the least sting, or any interruption. . . .

[There were] extraordinary views of divine things, and religious affections, being frequently attended with very great effects on the body. Nature often sinking under the weight of divine discoveries, and the strength of the body was taken away. The person was deprived of all ability to stand or speak. Sometimes the hands were clinched, and the flesh cold, but the senses remaining. Animal nature was often in a great emotion and agitation, and the soul so overcome with admiration, and a kind of omnipotent joy, as to cause the person, unavoidably to leap with all the might, with joy and mighty exultation. . . .³⁹

The thoughts of the perfect humility with which the saints in heaven worship God, and fall down before his throne, have often overcome the body, and set it into a great agitation.⁴⁰

There is more. And rather than finding yourself subject to *my* choice of what to emphasize, you can read it for yourself in "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England."⁴¹

We mustn't imagine that she was shut away by herself during all this time. Jonathan was away from home all except the first two days. So she was responsible for the home—caring for the seven children and the

³⁷ Ibid., 90.

³⁸ The section that tells Sarah's story is published as Appendix E in *Marriage to a Difficult Man* (2003 edition), 209-216.

³⁹ Jonathan Edwards, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival in New England," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman, 2 vols. (1834; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 1:376.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 377.

⁴¹ Ibid., 376-378. Also published as Appendix A in Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, 187.

guests and attending special gatherings at church. Probably no one grasped at the time how completely God was shaking and shaping her when she was alone.

This was only a month after Samuel Hopkins had moved into their home, so his impressions of the family were being formed in the midst of Sarah's most life-changing days.

Was Sarah's experience psychological or spiritual? Did it spring from the frustrations and pressures of her life? I suppose that none of us ever has *totally* pure motives or actions or causes in our spiritual activities, but there is no doubt that both Jonathan and Sarah recognized her experiences as being *from* God and *for* her spiritual delight and benefit. They have proved themselves to be people whose judgment in spiritual matters we can usually trust. So I don't feel inclined to explain away her understanding of her experiences. Nor would I want to minimize Jonathan's confirmation, implicit in his making the account public.

Stresses over finances, distress at having upset her husband, jealousy about another's ministry—all those things were real in Sarah's life. But we have seen from our own experience that God reveals himself through what is happening to us and around us. God used such things to show Sarah she needed him, to uncover her own weakness. And then, when the almost-physical sensations of God's presence came upon her, he was all the more precious and sweet to her, because of what he had forgiven and overcome for her.

Also I think back to Jonathan's early description of her, written in his Greek book. Granted, he was an infatuated lover. But he didn't make up his description out of nothing. He was writing about a certain kind of person, and we can see the shape of her, even if it is through Jonathan's rose-colored glasses.

... there are certain seasons in which this Great Being, in some way or other invisible, comes to her and fills her mind with exceeding sweet delight; and that she hardly cares for anything, except to meditate on Him.⁴²

That is very close to how she described this adult experience. And remember that as a thirteen-year-old, she loved "to be alone, walking in

⁴² Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 92.

the fields and groves, and seems to have some one invisible always conversing with her."⁴³

Thirteen-year-olds who are energized by being alone usually grow up to be adults who are energized by being alone. Where is that solitude for a woman with a newborn every other year, with a steady stream of travelers and apprentices living in her house, and with a town who notices every twitch of her life?

Here are some other reasons I believe she experienced God, and not just psychological distress or breakdown.

First, I don't know anyone who has, for no apparent reason, suddenly snapped out of psychological breakdown and been just fine after that. (Dodds seems to try to evade this argument by suggesting that when Jonathan had her sit down and tell him everything that had happened, he was acting as an unwitting forerunner of psychotherapy.⁴⁴)

Second, Jesus said, "You will recognize them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16). Sarah's life was different after these weeks—different in the ways you would expect after God had specially visited someone. Jonathan said she exhibited

a great meekness, gentleness, and benevolence of spirit and behaviour; and a great alteration in those things that formerly used to be the person's failings; seeming to be much overcome and swallowed up by the late great increase of grace, to the observation of those who are most conversant and most intimately acquainted.⁴⁵

He also reassured his reader that she had not become too heavenly-minded to be any earthly good.

Oh how good, said the person once, is it to work for God in the day-time, and at night to lie down under his smiles! High experiences and religious affections in this person have not been attended with any disposition at all to neglect the necessary business of a secular calling . . . but worldly business has been attended with great alacrity, as part of the service of God: the person declaring that, it being done thus, it was found to be as good as prayer.⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Edwards, "Thoughts on the Revival," 378.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, 216.

Her changed life bore the fingerprint of God, not of psychological imbalance. It is clear that Jonathan agreed with her belief that she had encountered God:

If such things are enthusiasm, and the fruits of a distempered brain, let my brain be evermore possessed of that happy distemper! If this be distraction, I pray God that the world of mankind may be all seized with this benign, meek, beneficent, beatifical, glorious distraction!⁴⁷

THE WILDERNESS

After more than twenty years, Jonathan was ousted from his church in Northampton. I'm not going to dwell on that, because it's a fairly well-known part of his life. But it is worth a moment of our time to empathize with the emotional and financial stress it would have been for Sarah. Her husband had been rejected. But until he had another position, they had to remain in Northampton. So for one year Sarah lived in a hostile setting and managed their large household with no salary coming in.

In Stockbridge there was a community of Indians and a few whites. They were urgently searching for a pastor at the same time that Jonathan was seeking God's next step for his life. In 1750 the Edwardses moved to Stockbridge, out on the western side of Massachusetts, on the pioneer edge of the British fingerhold on the continent.

In 1871 *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* ran an article featuring Stockbridge. This was more than one hundred years after Edwards's death, and yet he had come to bear international esteem surpassed (perhaps!) only by George Washington. Many paragraphs described his noteworthy role in the history of the town of Stockbridge. And though decades had passed, they hadn't forgotten the Northampton controversy that led to Jonathan's call to Stockbridge.

There succeeded to that vacant office in the wild woods one whose name is not only highly honored throughout this land, but better known and more honored abroad, perhaps, than that of any of our countrymen except Washington. As a preacher, a philosopher, and a person of devoted piety he is unsurpassed. . . . But . . . after a most successful ministry of more than 20 years, a controversy had arisen

⁴⁷ Edwards, "Thoughts on the Revival," 378.

between him and his people, and they had thrust him out from them rudely and almost in disgrace. The subsequent adoption of his views, not only at Northampton but throughout the churches of New England, has abundantly vindicated his position in that lamentable controversy. . . .

He was not too great in his own estimation to accept the place now offered him [in the small outpost of Stockbridge]. . . .

Edwards was almost a thinking machine. . . .

That a man thus thoughtful should yet be indifferent to many things of practical importance would not be strange. Accordingly we are told that the care of his domestic and secular affairs was devolved almost entirely upon his wife, who happily, while of kindred spirit with him in many respects, and fitted to be his companion, was also capable of assuming the cares which were thus laid upon her. It is said that Edwards did not know his own cows, nor even how many belonged to him. About all the connection he had with them seems to have been involved in the act of driving them to and from pasture occasionally, which he was willing to do for the sake of needful exercise. A story is told in this connection, which illustrates his obliviousness of small matters. As he was going for the cows once, a boy opened the gate for him with a respectful bow. Edwards acknowledged the kindness and asked the boy whose son he was. "Noah Clark's boy," was the reply. . . . On his return, the same boy . . . opened the gate for him again. Edwards [asked again who he was]. . . . "The same man's boy I was a quarter of an hour ago, Sir."⁴⁸

THE LAST CHAPTER

This was a family who had hardly tasted death, yet they were very aware of its constant nearness. How easily might a woman die in childbirth. How easily might a child die of fever. How easily might one be struck by a shot or an arrow of war. How easily might a fireplace ignite a house fire, with all asleep and lost.

When Jonathan wrote to his children, he often reminded them—not morbidly, but almost as a matter of fact—how close death might be. For Jonathan, the fact of death led automatically to the need for eternal life. He wrote to their ten-year-old Jonathan, Jr., about the death of a playmate. "This is a loud call of God to you to prepare for death. . . . Never

⁴⁸ "A New England Village," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, November 1871, <http://www.rootsweb.com/~maberksh/harpers/> (accessed 12-31-03).

give yourself any rest unless you have good evidence that you are converted and become a new creature.”⁴⁹

A family tragedy was the opening page of the final chapter of their lives.

Their daughter Esther was the wife of Aaron Burr, the president of the College of New Jersey, which would later be called Princeton. On September 24, 1757, this son-in-law of Jonathan and Sarah died suddenly, leaving Esther and two small children. This would be the first of five family deaths in a year.

Aaron Burr’s death left the presidency open at the College of New Jersey, and Edwards was invited to become president of the college. Jonathan had been extremely productive in his thinking and writing during the six Stockbridge years; so it was not easy to leave. But in January 1758 he set off for Princeton, expecting his family to join him in the spring.

George Marsden pictures the moment:

He left Sarah and his children in Stockbridge, as 17-year-old Susannah later reported, “as affectionately as if he should not come again.” When he was outside the house, he turned and declared, “I commit you to God.”⁵⁰

He had hardly moved into the President’s House at Princeton when he received news that his father had died. As Marsden says, “A great force in his life was finally gone, though the power of the personality had faded some years earlier.”⁵¹

In this final chapter of Jonathan’s and Sarah’s lives, there are key moments that encapsulate and confirm God’s work through Sarah Edwards in the main roles she had been given by him.

Sarah’s Role as a Mother, with the Desire to Raise Godly Children

When Aaron Burr died, we catch a glimpse of how well the mother had prepared the daughter for unexpected tragedy. Esther wrote to her mother, Sarah, two weeks after he died:

God has seemed sensibly near, in such a supporting and comfortable manner that I think I have never experienced the like. . . . I doubt not

⁴⁹ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 412.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 491.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

but I have your and my honoured father's prayers, daily, for me, but give me leave to entreat you to request earnestly of the Lord that I may never . . . faint under this his severe stroke. . . . O I am afraid I shall conduct myself so as to bring dishonour on . . . the religion which I profess.⁵²

At the darkest moment of her life, she fervently desired not to dishonor God.

Sarah's Role as the Wife of Jonathan

Soon after Jonathan arrived in Princeton, Jonathan was inoculated for smallpox. This was still an experimental procedure. He contracted the disease, and on March 22, 1758, he died, while Sarah was still back in Stockbridge, packing for the family's move to Princeton. Fewer than three months had passed since he had said good-bye at their doorstep. During the last minutes of his life, his thoughts and words were for his beloved wife. He whispered to one of his daughters:

It seems to me to be the will of God, that I must shortly leave you; therefore 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 for ever: and I hope she will be supported under so great a trial, and submit cheerfully to the will of God.⁵³

A week and a half later Sarah wrote to Esther (it had been only six months since Esther's husband had died):

My very dear child, What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod, and lay our hands upon our mouths! The Lord has done it. He has made me adore his goodness, that we had him so long. But my God lives; and he has my heart. O what a legacy my husband, and your father, has left us! We are all given to God; and there I am, and love to be.

Your affectionate mother,
Sarah Edwards⁵⁴

⁵² Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, 160.

⁵³ Sereno E. Dwight, "Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards," in *Works*, 1:clxxviii.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:clxxix.

Esther never read her mother's letter. On April 7, less than two weeks after her father's death, Esther died of a fever, leaving behind little Sally and Aaron, Jr. Sarah traveled to Princeton to stay with her grandchildren for a while and then take them back to Stockbridge with her.

Her Role as a Child of God

In October Sarah was traveling toward Stockbridge with Esther's children. While stopping in the home of friends, she was overcome with dysentery, and her life on earth ended. It was October 2, 1758. She was forty-nine. The people with her reported that "she apprehended her death was near, when she expressed her entire resignation to God and her desire that he might be glorified in all things; and that she might be enabled to glorify him to the last; and continued in such a temper, calm and resigned, till she died."⁵⁵

Hers was the fifth Edwards death in a year, and the fourth Edwards family grave in the Princeton Cemetery during that year.

WHO WAS SARAH EDWARDS?

She was the supporter and protector and home-builder for Jonathan Edwards, whose philosophy and passion for God is still vital 300 years after his birth.

She was the godly mother and example to eleven children who became the parents of outstanding citizens of this country, and—immensely more important to her—many are also citizens of heaven.

She was the hostess and comforter and encourager of Samuel Hopkins, and who knows how many others, who went on to minister to others, who went on to minister to others, who went on . . .

She was an example to George Whitefield, and who knows how many others, of a godly wife.

At the heart of all she was, she was a child of God, who from early years experienced sweet, spiritual communion with him, and who over the years grew in grace, and who at least once was very dramatically visited by God in a way that changed her life.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Dodds, *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, 169.

⁵⁶ Besides the references cited throughout the footnotes in this chapter, the following resources may also be of interest to the reader: Sharon James, *In Trouble and in Joy: Four Women Who Lived for God*

A Timeline of Sarah Edwards⁵⁷

October 5, 1703	Jonathan born, East Windsor, CT
January 9, 1710	Sarah born, New Haven, CT
1723	Jonathan writes "Apostrophe to Sarah Pierpont" in his Greek book
October 26, 1726	Jonathan begins preaching in Northampton, under leadership of Solomon Stoddard
February 15, 1727	Jonathan is ordained, Northampton
July 28, 1727	Jonathan and Sarah marry, New Haven
August 25, 1728	Sarah born
February 11, 1729	Solomon Stoddard dies; Jonathan becomes pastor
December 1729	Jonathan's sister, Jerusha, dies
April 26, 1730	Daughter Jerusha born
February 13, 1732	Esther born
1734	Great Awakening begins in Northampton
April 7, 1734	Mary born
February 10, 1736	Jonathan's grandmother, Esther Mather Stoddard, dies
August 21, 1736	Jonathan's sister Lucy dies of "throat distemper"
August 31, 1736	Daughter Lucy born
July 25, 1738	Timothy born
March 1740	Measles epidemic; several of the Edwards children ill
1740	Sarah's portrait painted
June 20, 1740	Susannah (Sukey) born
October 17-19, 1740	Whitefield in Northampton
Spring 1741	Jonathan asks for set salary
July 1741	Jonathan preaches "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" in Enfield
December 1741	Samuel Hopkins arrives
January 19—February 4, 1742	Sarah's extraordinary spiritual experience
May 9, 1743	Eunice born
1744	Request for higher salary
May 26, 1745	Son Jonathan born
May 6, 1747	Elizabeth born
May 28, 1747	David Brainerd arrives
October 9, 1747	Brainerd dies

(Auburn, Mass.: Evangelical Press USA, 2003); Carol F. Karlsen and Laurie Crumpacker, eds., *The Journal of Esther Edwards Burr, 1754-1757* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986); Doreen Moore, *Good Christians, Good Husbands? Leaving a Legacy in Marriage & Ministry* (Rosshire, England: Christian Focus, 2004), chapter on Jonathan Edwards; Heidi L. Nichols, "Those Exceptional Edwards Women," *Christian History* 22 (2003): 23-25 (available on the Internet at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/2003/001/9.23.html>).

⁵⁷ This chronology is gleaned from my own reading, with clarification of details by Kenneth Minkema, "A Jonathan Edwards Chronology," <http://www.yale.edu/wje/html/chronology.html> (accessed 1-29-04).

February 14, 1748	Jerusha dies
April 8, 1750	Pierrepoint born
June 11, 1750	Daughter Sarah and Elihu Parsons marry
June 22, 1750	Jonathan dismissed from NH church
July 2, 1750	Jonathan preaches farewell sermon
November 8, 1750	Mary and Timothy Dwight marry
August 8, 1751	Installation at Stockbridge
October 18, 1751	Family moves to Stockbridge
1752	Sarah ill, almost dies
May 14, 1752	Grandchild born, Mary's Timothy
May 29, 1752	Grandchild born, Sarah's Esther
June 29, 1752	Esther and Aaron Burr marry
April, 1753	Timothy leaves home to live with Burrs and study at Princeton
December, 1753	Grandchild born, Sarah's Elihu
1754	Grandchild born, Esther's Sarah
1754-1763	French and Indian War
February 6, 1756	Grandchild born, Esther's Aaron
1756	Grandchild born, Mary's Erastus
September 24, 1757	Aaron Burr dies, leaving presidency of Princeton open
January 27, 1758	Jonathan's father dies
February 16, 1758	Jonathan becomes president of Princeton
February 23, 1758	Jonathan is inoculated against smallpox
March 22, 1758	Jonathan dies
April 7, 1758	Esther dies
October 2, 1758	Sarah dies