

A GOD ENTRANCED
VISION *of* ALL THINGS

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ALL THINGS

THE LEGACY OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

JOHN PIPER
& JUSTIN TAYLOR

G E N E R A L E D I T I O R S

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To

Iain H. Murray

whose life and labors proclaim
a God-entranced vision of all things

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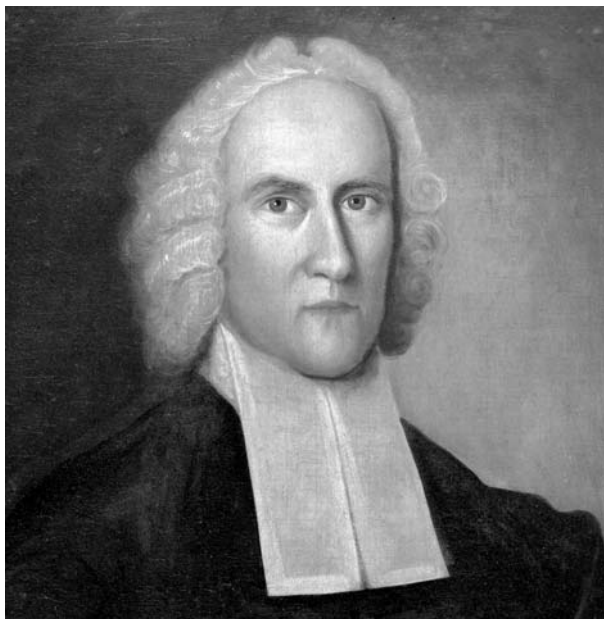
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Jonathan Edwards



Sarah Edwards

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INTRODUCTION

Justin Taylor

Twenty-five hundred people gathered in Minneapolis in October 2003 to celebrate the 300th birthday of Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), considered by many to be “the greatest philosopher-theologian yet to grace the American scene.”¹ The conference, hosted by Desiring God Ministries, was entitled “A God-Entranced Vision of All Things: The Unrivalled Legacy of Jonathan Edwards.”

This book is a continuation and expansion of that tercentenary celebration, with the aim of introducing readers to Edwards, and more importantly, to his “God-entranced vision of all things.” The phrase is adapted from Mark Noll’s lament:

Evangelicals have not thought about life from the ground up as Christians, because their entire culture has ceased to do so. Edwards’ *piety* continued on in the revivalist tradition, his *theology* continued on in academic Calvinism, but there were no successors to his *God-entranced worldview* or his profoundly theological philosophy. The disappearance of Edwards’ perspective in American Christian history has been a tragedy.²

The contributors to this volume pray that God will turn this tragic tide, and that the Bride of Christ will once again cherish and proclaim this Christ-exalting, God-entranced vision.

This vision is not properly Edwards’s, but God’s. God is the designer and definer of reality, and all of life must be lived to his glory. “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31), working “heartily, as for the Lord and not for men” (Col. 3:23). We are commanded by Christ to “love the Lord [our] God with all [our] heart and with all [our] soul and with all [our] mind” (Matt. 22:37). If we

¹ Perry Miller, “General Editor’s Note,” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957), viii.

² Mark Noll, “Jonathan Edwards, Moral Philosophy, and the Secularization of American Christian Thought,” *Reformed Journal* 33 (February 1983): 26 (emphasis added).

do anything apart from faith in God, we have sinned (Rom. 14:23), and God is displeased (Heb. 11:6). “Chance” is a myth, “autonomy” is a lie, “neutrality” is impossible. Everything is created by God, everything is controlled by God, and everything’s proper purpose is to be for God and his glory. All things are “from him and through him and to him. . . . To him be glory forever” (Rom. 11:36; cf. 1 Cor. 8:6). Or as Edwards put it: “the whole is of God, and in God, and to God, and God is the beginning, middle and end in this affair.”³ This is the God-given, God-centered, God-intoxicated, God-entranced vision of all things. Edwards did not invent this vision. But God gave him the grace to articulate this vision as well as or better than anyone ever has. To illustrate the flavor and contours of his vision, listen to Edwards’s words as he preaches to his Northampton congregation on the beauty of God and our enjoyment of him:

The enjoyment of God is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows; but God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams. But God is the ocean. Therefore it becomes us to spend this life only as a journey toward heaven, as it becomes us to make the seeking of our highest end and proper good, the whole work of our lives; to which we should subordinate all other concerns of life. Why should we labour for, or set our hearts on, any thing else, but that which is our proper end, and true happiness?⁴

EDWARDS’S NEGATIVE REPUTATION

While there has been an amazing resurgence of interest in and respect for Edwards in the academy,⁵ he still suffers from an “identity problem” in the church. Most know little about him other than the fact that he delivered America’s most famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” often reprinted in literature anthologies and American

³ 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), 531.

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, “The Christian Pilgrim,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman, 2 vols. (1834; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 2:244.

⁵ 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.

History textbooks. Contemporary fire-and-brimstone preachers are often grating and graceless, and Edwards is imagined to be the same. But nothing could be further from the truth. What most of us don't know is that while "Edwards did know his hell . . . he knew his heaven better."⁶ John Gerstner concludes his study on Edwards's view of heaven and hell in this way:

If he spoke more of hell, it was only because he feared more people were going there, and he desired to set them on their way to heaven. . . . Even as he defended "the justice of God in the damnation of sinners" he triumphantly extolled the divine and everlasting mercy in the salvation of saints. Jonathan Edwards was in his truest element not as the faithful, fiery preacher of "sinners in the hands of an angry God"—though this he ever was and remained—but as the rhapsodic seer of the "beatific vision."⁷

It is true that Edwards's worldview often sounds strange to our modern ears. Some of what he writes is hard to understand; some of it is simply hard to accept. But as readers encounter Edwards, they would be well-advised to consider the counsel of biographer George Marsden:

If there is an emphasis that appears difficult, or harsh, or overstated in Edwards, often the reader can better appreciate his perspective by asking the question: "How would this issue look if it really were the case that bliss or punishment for a literal *eternity* was at stake?"⁸

AN OVERVIEW OF THIS PRESENT VOLUME

Part One of this book examines Edwards's life and legacy. After arguing that God rests lightly upon the evangelical church today, John Piper shows why we need to recover the weight of the glory of God through Edwards's vision that "God is glorified not only by His glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in." He addresses the question of *how* this might happen and then lets Edwards answer several objections to this

⁶ John H. Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell* (reprint, Morgan, Penn.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1998), 9.

⁷ Ibid., 93. The most powerful ways to verify this judgment is to read Edwards's sermon, "Heaven Is a World of Love," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 366-397. An excellent summary that captures both the content and the flavor of Edwards's view of heaven can be found in chapter 9 of Sam Storms's book, *One Thing: Developing a Passion for the Beauty of God* (Rosshire, England: Christian Focus, 2004).

⁸ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 5.

worldview. Steve Nichols provides a chronological overview of Edwards's life, offering insight into the man, an introduction to his theology, and an exploration of his legacy in the academy and in the church. Noël Piper gives us a window into the godly, albeit imperfect Edwards home through a biography of Sarah, Jonathan's wife. Jonathan wrote to her on his deathbed that their marriage was an "uncommon union," and Mrs. Piper shows us that Sarah was Jonathan's "home and haven."

Part Two looks at the lessons, both positive and negative, that we might appropriate from Edwards for today. J. I. Packer unpacks Edwards's theology of revival as a reviving of religion for the glory of God, while also comparing the contribution of John Wesley (born in the same year as Edwards). Packer believes that Edwards's theology of revival is perhaps "the most important single contribution that Edwards has to make to evangelical thinking today,"⁹ and in this essay he tells us why. Don Whitney explains what is meant by "spiritual disciplines," looks at how Edwards pursued his passion for God through them, and suggests lessons we can learn from his practice of these personal, biblical practices designed for the increase of godliness and Christlikeness. Mark Dever explains the circumstances surrounding the firing of Edwards from the pastorate in Northampton and explores the significant theological issues at stake, showing the implications for our doctrine of the church and the practice of church discipline. Finally, Sherard Burns has been assigned the difficult task of examining how Edwards could pursue a God-entranced vision of all things and yet own slaves. Burns explores the eighteenth-century context and also reminds us of the absolute sovereignty of God even over the pain and tragedy of America's "peculiar institution." He does all of this while weaving a careful path through the Scylla of callow condemnation on the one hand and the Charybdis of easy exoneration on the other.

For Part Three, we have asked three Edwards scholars to help us understand some of his most influential and demanding works: Paul Helm on *Original Sin*, Sam Storms on *Freedom of the Will*, and Mark Talbot on *Religious Affections*. These chapters re-present, as it were, Edwards's theses and arguments in an understandable way and show how his theology has contemporary application for our lives. Our hope

⁹ J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1990), 316.

is that these guides might encourage you to set about the task of working through these profound and challenging writings on your own.

Finally, we have included two appendices. The first is an Edwardsean sermon given by John Piper on 2 Corinthians 3:18—4:7. In the second, I attempt to answer some objections and recommend some resources regarding the challenge of reading Edwards today.

EDWARDS'S LEGACY: HE LEFT GOD WITH US

The risk in publishing a book about one man's vision of God is that the focus will be upon the man to the neglect of God himself. On the other hand, it is possible to *dishonor* God by not gladly receiving and appropriating the gifts he has given us. In fact, to neglect and to forget these forerunners in the faith is to be disobedient to God, who commands us through the author of Hebrews to "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith" (Heb. 13:7). Edwards spoke the word of God to us, and we are thus commanded to remember, to consider, and then to imitate him, insofar as he imitated the Lord (cf. 1 Thess. 1:6).

Perhaps the most fitting tribute we can give to Edwards comes from the words of Edwards himself. Here is how he counseled his flock to view faithful ministers of the gospel:

Useful men are some of the greatest blessings of a people. To have many such is more for a people's happiness than almost anything, unless it be God's own gracious, spiritual presence amongst them; they are precious gifts of heaven. . . . Particularly, I would beseech and exhort those aged ones that yet remain, while they do live with us, to let us have much of their prayers, that when they leave the younger generations, they may leave God with them.¹⁰

Edwards was one of the greatest blessings the church has ever known. His life and writings have glorified God and increased our understanding of and happiness in God. He was a precious gift of heaven.

Upon hearing the news that Jonathan had died, his wife Sarah wrote in a letter to their daughter Lucy: "O what a legacy my husband, and

¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards, "The Death of Faithful Ministers a Sign of God's Displeasure," in *The Salvation of Souls: Nine Previously Unpublished Sermons on the Call of Ministry and the Gospel* by Jonathan Edwards, ed. Richard A. Bailey and Gregory A. Wills (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2002), 34, 39.

your father, has left us! We are all given to God; and there I am, and love to be.”¹¹ His legacy is that when he left this earth, he left God with his family—and with us.

Our prayer is that we all might recover and embrace this God-entranced vision of all things, growing in grace and knowledge, for the glory of God in Christ.

Soli Deo gloria.

¹¹ Sereno E. Dwight, “Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards,” in *Works*, ed. Hickman, 1:clxxix.