

A Godward Life

Biblical Lessons from the Life of Jonathan Edwards

Introduction:

In his introduction to the Life and Diary of David Brainerd, Jonathan Edwards wrote:

“There are two ways of representing and recommending true religion and virtue to the world: the one, by doctrine and precept; the other, by instance and example; both are abundantly used in Holy Scripture.”

Each year (typically the first week in January) I present a biographical message from a hero of the faith is to fan the flame in your heart for a passionate pursuit of Christ by offering you both doctrine and example. I want us to look at the lives of upright and blameless men of God who lived centuries before us, and see in them a faith worthy of our imitation. I want us to see the word of God applied in a way that we can aspire to. I want us to look beyond twenty-first century, western, watered down Christianity to a kind of living faith that is both more devoted and more blessed. And when we are done, perhaps God’s Spirit will have sparked a new resolve in your soul to remember those who have walked according to the pattern set by Jesus and the apostles, and considering the fruit of their lives we might imitate their faith.

I. A Brief Biography of Jonathan Edwards:

1. Jonathan Edwards was born at East Windsor, Connecticut, on October 5, 1703. His parents were Rev. Timothy Edwards who for sixty-four years was pastor of the Congregational Church of East Windsor; and Esther Stoddard, daughter of the Rev. Solomon Stoddard, who was for more than fifty years pastor of the church of Northampton, Massachusetts.
2. Jonathan was the only son in a family of 11 children. Think of it, one boy with 10 sisters. And as each of his siblings grew to be six feet tall, young Jonathan became affectionately known as the boy with sixty feet of sisters. In the early years he was home schooled by his father who was a Latin, Greek, and Hebrew scholar. Jonathan began the study of Latin at the age of six. When he was 10 years old he wrote a reply to a fellow student, who held that the soul of man is material. This letter was marked by humor and sarcasm and showed an unusual depth of thought. At age 12 he wrote an essay on the Wood Spider, with many detailed notes and observations concerning its habits.
3. Young Jonathan entered Yale College at New Haven in 1716, just before his 13th birthday. And thought he had been deeply affected spiritually under the ministry of his father when he was a child, he claims to have not been truly born again until the latter part of his college years.
4. In September 1720, just before his seventeenth birthday, Edwards graduated from Yale College with the highest honors. He continued on at Yale for three more years until he received a degree of Master of Arts in September, 1723.
5. In the summer of 1726, Mr. Edwards was invited to become the assistant to his grandfather, the Rev. Solomon Stoddard, pastor of the Congregational Church at Northampton,

Massachusetts. He accepted the call, and on February 15, 1727, when he was 23 years old, he was ordained to the ministry and installed as co-pastor of the church.

6. Six months later, on July 28th, Jonathan Edwards married Sarah Pierrepont, the daughter of one of the founders of Yale College. He was 23 and she was 17. Jonathan and Sarah had an unusually happy married life of more than 30 years, and as in his father's family, there came 11 children – three sons, eight daughters.

7. Two years later, in February, 1729, Rev. Stoddard unexpectedly died, and the whole care of the large congregation came solely upon this young pastor. It was a traditional Congregational Church which in 1735 had 620 members. During his ministry at this church Edwards catechized the children, counseled people in his study, and delivered his usual two-hour message each week.

8. Though relatively inexperienced in the ministry, as a result of unceasing prayer, faithful labor, and the special blessing of God, a great revival came upon the church in Northampton and continued through the years 1734 and 1735. It extended to every part of the town, and someone in nearly every household was touched. There were more than 300 conversions in a period of only a few months, and the whole atmosphere of the town was changed.

9. Later Northampton was the scene of a second revival in the spring of 1740. That autumn George Whitefield, the great British evangelist, made a second visit to the American colonies and spent four days with Mr. Edwards. Whitefield preached five sermons from Edwards' pulpit. As a result of Whitefield's and Edwards' preaching, along with the ministry of other faithful pastors, revival broke out over all of New England, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, and as far south as South Carolina and Georgia. There were literally thousands of conversions, and many, cold, dead churches were brought back to life.

10. These were the events in early American history known commonly as the Great Awakening. And by God's grace Jonathan Edwards, by faithful preaching and what He called "Godward" living, played a significant role in this extraordinary work of the Spirit.

II. Lessons of Faithfulness from a God-ward Life:

What is it about the life of Jonathan Edwards that made him such a useful instrument in the hands of God? And what can we learn from him about how to live more faithfully to Scripture and to be more pleasing to the Lord.

1. Edwards Embraced the Supremacy of God over all:

A. Perhaps the greatest root problem in the American variety of Christianity is that we have forgotten what life is all about. We have been duped into believing that it is all about us, when in fact it is all about God. We often act scandalized over the idea that our country is moving toward an almost unanimous abandonment of God for humanistic self-help and psychology. But walk into any Christian book store and take a look at what is selling! The best sellers are Christianized versions of self-help and psychology! The 20th century church has been thoroughly disciplined by the world and yet we insist on holding ourselves aloof over it. And what's worse, the world sees it and we don't.

- B. There is a strangely dissonant tone of hypocrisy that comes from a people who twist that holy Book, which was intended to reveal the majesty of God, into some kind of divinely inspired self-help manual. And it exposes the surreal truth that the highest pursuits of God's children is often no different than the highest pursuits of God's enemies – namely a problem free, self esteeming, self-fulfilled, thoroughly entertained and happy life. The only difference is the means by which we think we can achieve it. They believe it can be achieved through money, power, and pleasure. Many of us believe it can be found in the same places but sanctify it by saying we get it from God.
- C. But that, my friends, is not why we exist (“we exist to proclaim...”). God's purpose for creating humanity was not so that humanity could be fulfilled, but so that God's own infinite Person and character would be glorified, exalted, delighted in by us. The purpose of our existence is to live in such a way that proclaims, upholds, and relishes the glory of God, and which invites all people to join us in the joyful worship of Jesus Christ.

1). Everything was created not only by Him but for Him.

“For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created by Him and for Him” (Col. 1:16)

“The LORD hath made all things for himself”(Prov. 16;4)

“Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things; to whom be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:35-36).

How do these truths apply to us? They were foundational of Edward's life and teaching.

2). Edwards wrote:

“In short, the words of the apostle in 1 Cor. 6:20 are worthy of particular notice. “You are not your own; for you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are His.” Here not only is glorifying God spoken of as what comprehends the very purpose of religion, and of Christ redeeming us; but the apostle urges that inasmuch as we are not our own, we ought not to act as if we were our own, but God's; and should not use the members of our bodies, or faculties of our souls for ourselves, but for God, as making God our end. That is, in making His glory our purpose for life.”

3). Perhaps the single characteristic that made Jonathan Edwards so unique in his day and so attractive to godly men in ours, was the relentless God-centeredness of his preaching, writing, and living. As a young man he made a list of personal resolutions for the conduct of his own life.

4 Resolved, Never to do anything, whether in soul or body, less or more, but what tends to the glory of God.

23 Resolved, Frequently to consider some deliberate action [in my own life] which seems most unlikely to have been done for the glory of God, and trace it

back to the original intention, designs, and ends of it; and, if I find it not to be for God's glory, to repute it as a breach of the fourth resolution.

- 4). This is why Edwards was so passionate about Paul's doctrine of election. His first published work was called *God Glorified in Man's Dependence*.
- 5). Edwards was so concerned about the man-centered doctrines that were creeping into the church of his day that he wrote a 150 page essay called *The End For Which God Created the World* in which he argues that God's purpose for creating the world is, "first, that the glory of God might be magnified in the universe, and second, that Christ's ransomed people from all times and all nations would rejoice in God above all things.

We can learn a lot from Edward's view of the supremacy of God over all things. What the church in America needs above all else, I think, is a few men and women who earnestly believe that God is God; that He is worthy of a life fully devoted to Him. Edward's faith is worthy of our imitation first, because his life and ministry Acknowledged The Supremacy of God Over All.

2. Edwards Delighted in God as the Highest Good.

- A. Jesus said that the greatest commandment in all the Bible is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength." As we strive to obey this command we learn that in doing so not only does God receive the highest praise, but we enjoy the greatest good.
- B. Think about it. God, in His very essence, is infinite in all His perfections. That is He not just loving, righteous, holy, and good; He is the definition of life, He is infinitely righteous, infinitely holy, infinitely good. He is the source of all these virtues, and without Him they do not exist. There is no righteousness, holiness, goodness, or love that is not as nothing in comparison to Him. Therefore, when God commands us to love Him, He is commanding us to enjoy the highest, greatest, most satisfying good in the universe.

King David knew this about God and wrote:

"Your lovingkindness, O LORD, extends to the heavens, Your faithfulness reaches to the skies. ⁶ Your righteousness is like the mountains of God; Your judgments are like a great deep. O LORD, You preserve man and beast. ⁷ How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings. ⁸ They drink their fill of the abundance of Your house; And You give them to drink of the river of Your delights. ⁹ For with You is the fountain of life; In Your light we see light (Psalm 36:5–9).

With this in mind he then exhorts us (Psa. 37:4) to...

"Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart." (Psalm 37:4)

The Apostle Paul said it this way: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice!" (Phil 4:4)

- C. Edwards was deeply committed to applying this truth to his own life
- D. He delighted in nothing more than communing with God in prayer, reading and meditating on His Word, and heart affecting worship. In his personal journal (1773) he wrote:

“Once, as I rode out into the woods for my health...having alighted from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been to walk for divine contemplation and prayer, I had a view that was for me extraordinary, of the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man, and His wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condescension. This grace that appeared so calm and sweet, appeared also great above the heavens. The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception – which continued, as near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears and weeping aloud. I felt an ardency of soul to be, what I know not otherwise how to express, emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust and to be full of Christ alone; to love Him with a holy and pure love; to trust in Him; to live upon Him; to serve and follow Him; to be perfectly sanctified and made pure, with a divine and heavenly purity.”

- E. This same delight was found specifically in reading and meditating on God’s Word. He wrote:

“I had then, and at other times, the greatest delight in the holy Scriptures, of any book whatsoever. Oftentimes reading it every word seemed to touch my heart. I felt a harmony between something in my heart and those sweet and powerful words. I seemed often to see so much light exhibited by every sentence, and such a refreshing food communicated, that I could not get along in reading; often dwelling long on one sentence to see the wonders communicated in it, and yet almost every sentence seemed to be full of wonders.

- F. His words are reminiscent of Jesus’ own when He quoted the prophet as saying, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

- G. Elsewhere, Jesus cried out with a loud voice: “If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.’”

- H. What a timely message this is for today’s church which seems committed to seeking to satisfy its soul in everything but God. Edwards often experienced the blessing of obeying the command, “Delight yourself in the Lord...” We would do well to imitate his faith.

Not only can we learn from Edward’s (1) acknowledgement of God’s supremacy over all, and his (2) delighting in God as the highest Good, but from his...

3. Edwards Live Resolved To Please the Lord in Everything:

- A. The Word of God calls us not only to understand and believe the truth of Scripture, but to live a life that is wholly different from what it was before becoming God’s child. Hence the apostle Paul told the Colossian believers:

“For this reason also, since the day we heard of [your salvation], we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects...”(Col 1:9-10)

“And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord, Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.” (Col 3:17)

“Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men.” (Col 3:23)

B. The Christian life is lived in the details, not the generalities. We must learn that every detail of our lives counts either for or against the glory of God. And we must act on our own behalf to pursue a life that is truly Godward.

C. Edwards knew this to be true, so at the age of 19, he began recording personal resolutions for how he would govern his life for the glory of God. In the end, he compiled seventy resolutions which he committed to reviewing at least once a week to keep them fresh on his mind. Here is a sampling of those resolutions;

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

#6 Resolved, To live with all my might while I do live. [Retirement]

#8 Resolved, To act, in all respects, both speaking and doing, as if nobody had been so vile as I, and as if I had committed the same sins [as they], or had the same infirmities or failings as others; and that I will let the knowledge of their failings promote nothing but shame in myself, and only prove an occasion of my confessing my own sins and misery to God.

#16 Resolved, Never to speak evil of anyone so that it shall tend to his dishonor, more or less, upon no account, except for some real good.

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

#22 Resolved, To endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness in the other world, as I possibly can, with all the might, power, vigor, and vehemence, yea, violence, I am capable of, or can bring myself to exert, in any way...

#25 Resolved, To examine carefully and constantly what one thing in me is, which causes me to doubt the love of God, and to direct all my forces against it.

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

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

D. Too many of us who claim to have a relationship with the glorious Lord and Savior, live adrift in the tide of our culture and impulses rather than pursuing the knowledge of God with all our might.

- E. Not only can we learn from Edward's to (1) acknowledge God's supremacy over all, and to (2) delight in God as the highest Good, and to (3) Resolve to please the Lord in everything, but...

4. Edwards Saw in Creation an Invitation to Worship:

A. It's hard to worship while living at the speed of light. Events, people, and things go by so quickly that we rarely have time to stop and contemplate them in light of eternity; God's goal of glorifying Himself in our wonder and delight of Him is greatly inhibited by the overwhelming torrent of choices, options, and information that are always instantly available to us at the touch of a smartphone. In fact, I don't hesitate to say that it's impossible to pursue the "Godward Life" without restraining the ubiquitous diversions that turn our eyes, our minds, and our hearts away from God in favor of relatively worthless things. One thing that can help with this is to discipline ourselves to notice and take delight in the divine majesty and artistry apparent in creation.

- 1). David wrote: "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands" (Psalm 19:1). When was the last time you heard the heavens telling the glory of God and declaring the work of His hands?
- 2). Picking up on the significance of that truth, Paul wrote (Rom. 1:19), "that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse."
- 3). We cannot see God, but by viewing what He has made we see something of His glory.
- 4). After his salvation, Edwards became increasingly interested in the natural sciences. He loved what God had made and in studying it he was convinced he was ultimately studying God Himself. In the record of his salvation testimony he writes:

"The appearance of everything was altered. There seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything. God's excellency, His wisdom, His purity, and love seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds and sky, in the grass, flowers, and trees; in the water and all nature... I often felt a mourning and lamenting in my heart, that I had not turned to God sooner, that I might have had more time to grow in grace. My mind was greatly fixed on divine things; indeed almost perpetually in the contemplation of them."

In another place he wrote:

"I often used to sit and view the moon for a long time; and, in the day, spent much time in viewing the clouds and sky, to behold the sweet glory of God in these things; in the meantime, singing forth, with a low voice, my contemplations of the Creator and Redeemer." (His view of thunderstorms also changed)

- 5). Let me suggest, beloved, that we cannot delight in the glory of God while driving 65mph down the highway, listening to the radio, sipping on a latte, and responding to a text on your iPhone! How many sunsets, moonscapes, cloud formations, constellations, waterfalls, and gorgeous Texas prairie scenes do we miss because we

are so frenetically busy with other things. The heavens and the earth are incessantly singing God's praises, but we are just too busy to hear it.

- 6). Would we even know what to say the next time we see the glory of God on display? How about a hymn we all know:

“When thro’ the woods and forest glades I wander, And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees. When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur, And hear the brook and feel the gently breeze.

Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee

How great Thou Art! How great Thou Art!

Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee;

How great Thou Art! How great Thou Art!

- 7). Edwards, like David, and Paul before him, knew the delight of glorifying God in the things he saw. *We would do well to imitate his faith.*

- B. The author of Hebrews wrote: “Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith” (Heb 13:7).

Jonathan Edwards was by no means a perfect man. He of all people knew how utterly sinful he was at the core. But he was faithful. He pursued with passion what he called the “Godward” life. We would do well to imitate his faith.