

A “God-Centered” Vision of All Things

The Life and Ministry of Jonathan Edwards

November 5, 2017

Hebrews 13:7

Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.

To the Glory of God

Now in my Sermons and Bible Studies, I use the term “God-centered” a lot. And it is my desire today to make sure you all understand what I mean when I use that term and how to test yourself to see if you are “God-centered”. So, there are two different aspects to the concept of “God-centeredness” that we need to understand:

1. We should be “God-centered”
2. God is “God-centered”

God should be the best and the highest and the most and the greatest of all things to us. And even though we may struggle for that to be true in our lives, and may vacillate between being “Man-centered” and “God-centered”, God Himself is *always* “God-centered”. For example, the man who wrote **Psalm 106** describes the motivation *behind why* God saves sinners like this:

Psalm 106:6, 8

6 We have sinned like our fathers, We have committed iniquity, we have behaved wickedly.

8 Nevertheless He saved them for the sake of His name, That He might make His power known.

Here, in verse 8, the psalmist says that the main, overarching reason behind *why* God saved us is *not* because we asked Him to or even because we *needed* it, but for “the sake of His Name”.

Now, don’t misunderstand what I am saying. We are told *repeatedly* in Scripture that we are to ask God to save us. And the

Bible is crystal clear that we certainly *need* to be saved. Yet, even though both of those statements are true, that is *not* the main reason behind *why* God actually forgives and saves us. And this should make us ponder. The reality is that the Bible teaches clearly and repeatedly that there is something *more important* than either our "needs" or even our "desires" that *motivates* God to do what He does. And that other thing is:

The Glory of God

Sacred Scripture reveals that God does what He does, *primarily*, so that He will be seen and known and adored and marveled at and praised and feared and worshipped and treasured above all things. The catalyst behind *why* God does all that He does is so that *He* will look like the Beautiful and Glorious Being that He truly is. And that Biblical Reality puts God, not Man, in the center of all things.

You see, part of what it means to be "fallen" and a "sinner" is that we set our affections on things that are passing away rather than on the supreme Value of the Universe, which is God. We derive delight and we seek the fullness of joy from the "beggarly elements" of this world, and *not* from the Fountain of all Life. And that attitude, an act of us, preferring what has been made, over He, which made all things, *insults* God's pristine Holiness. It *devalues* Him to simply be "one thing" among many other equally valuable things, from which humans can choose to love and serve. And you simply cannot be more evil than that.

So, that single Concept is the great Passion of God, the Divine Motivation behind whatever He does in the earth. So, why does God choose some to graciously save while leaving others to themselves? Well, the Prophet Isaiah gives us a hint in **Isaiah 43:5-7**, when he wrote:

5 "Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, And gather you from the west.

6 "I will say to the north, 'Give *them* up!' And to the south, 'Do not hold *them* back.' Bring My sons from afar And My daughters from the ends of the earth,

7 Everyone who is called by My name, And whom I have created for My glory, Whom I have formed, even whom I have made."

Now, there are a few other ways of understanding this concept throughout the Bible. Instead of saying that God does what He does "for My Own Glory", sometimes God says that He does it the way that the Apostle John wrote:

1 John 2:12

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake.

... or the way that the Prophet Ezekiel expressed it in **Ezekiel 6:9-10:**

9 "Then those of you who escape will remember Me among the nations to which they will be carried captive, how I have been hurt by their adulterous hearts which turned away from Me, and by their eyes which played the harlot after their idols; and they will loathe themselves in their own sight for the evils which they have committed, for all their abominations.

10 "Then they will know that I am the Lord; I have not said in vain that I would inflict this disaster on them."

So, those three expressions:

- ✓ **For My Glory**
- ✓ **For My Name's Sake**
- ✓ **So, they will Know that I am the Lord**

.. are the most common ways that the 40 writers of sacred Scripture used to denote the "radical God-centeredness" of God.

Now even though most of us are not very committed to this one single Concept, God is. And even though many, among those who attend Churches all over this country today, will not even think about this Concept, I am telling you that this one single Concept means more to God than anything else, and is the fundamental Reason behind *why* God does all that He does, *including* creating the Universe to begin with and saving lost sinners.

So, what did the writer of **Psalm 106** mean when he said that God saved them "for His Name's sake"? Well, the answer is at the end of verse 8:

... [So] **That He might make His power known.**

So, what I mean when I say that *God* is "God-centered" is that He acts like that. And what I mean when I say that God is *radically* "God-centered" is that it is *all* that God does. Making sure that He alone is known and feared and valued above all is always, at all times, at the very *forefront* of God's Mind whenever He says or does *anything*. So, *everything* that God says and does is to that one single end.

So, the main reason that God forgives sin and saves sinners is *not* simply to benefit us, even though it does benefit us greatly. No, God is "God-centered", and that means that the main reason *why* God forgives sin and saves sinners is for "the sake of" His great Name. So, that He alone will be "hallowed". So, God saves to make known His Own Power.

That's what it means for God to be radically "God-centered". And what we mean when we say that *we* are "God-centered" (or that we *desire* to be "God-centered", or that we are *striving* to be "God-centered") is that we enjoy and take pleasure and find the fullness of our own Joy in that being true about God. Therefore, God's Own radical "God-centeredness" *satisfies* us. It makes us *happy* to have God save us, for "God's Sake". We are *thrilled* that this is the way it is. We get *pleasure* in seeing it and *savoring* it. And we really enjoy talking about God doing it that way.

And so, by default, that means that we are *not* the focus of God in the earth. Our wants and needs are *not* the main reason why God does anything. Human beings are not the "center attraction" or the "center of attention" to *anything* that God does or says.

God is the most glorious and the happiest Being in the Universe, and that means that Salvation is an expression of God's Love to wicked sinners whereby He draws us to Himself (at great Cost to Himself), and so radically changes us (by what He alone does for us) that our eyes and mind are open, and we see Him as the glorious and beautiful Being that He is, and we find the fullness of our own Joy in God. And that means that, ultimately, our desire and need to be saved is *not* the main reason behind why God forgives and saves us.

Now a few weeks ago, in our Journey through **1 Peter**, I gave you a very important fundamental Principle that will help you to make sense of God's Will in the earth. And that Principle is that, when we are talking about physical healing or material blessings, or even Salvation itself, God is always seeking to do two things:

1. Humble the Pride of Man
2. Make Known His Own Worth

.. and both of those two concepts are equally important to God. And that is *why* what God does *in* us and *through* us and *to* us is *always* "by" His Grace, and it is always "through" the gift of faith that He gives to us. God always *initiates* everything that is done and we always *respond*. God never responds to humans. Therefore, God's Good gifts like healing and blessing, and even Salvation, are carried out through God's Mercy that is distributed according to God's own Divine Prerogative, and *not* because we did something to *earn* them or *deserve* them, and not because God is ever, in any way, *obligated* to heal or bless or save us. And by doing everything "by" Grace and "through" the gift of faith, God assures that what is done will always exalt Himself and humble the Pride of Man.

Everything that exalts Man belittles God, and everything that exalts God belittles Man. So, to the degree that we *decrease* in importance is the degree to which the great Value and Worth of God can be made known. And to the degree that the worth and value of Man is exalted, God is diminished.

Now, historically, the Christian Church believed and taught this. For the majority of its existence, all Sermons and Teaching upheld the dynamic that whatever exalts God will always humble Man. Therefore, the greatest quality that human could possess was Humility, *not* material blessings or strong bodies or dynamic ministries.

But over the last several decades, this simple but profound Concept has been hijacked and perverted. So, now we have a creature called "Self-Esteem" that says that every known evil in Society is based on the person not thinking highly enough about himself. And so, the effort to exalt Man, the struggle to build up the importance and value and worth of Man, over against God, is now the main goal of all therapy, all counselling, and, sadly, much of the preaching and teaching in the modern Church. And this effort is called being "Man-centered", where Man is now at the center of all that God does and says, and that it is the benefit that God can give to Man that is the most important. And, of course, the main casualty for this warped theology is the Glory of God. Most people who lay claim to being saved today have never one

time seen the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ, and they do not hold God to be the focus of all that God is doing in the earth. And we are all the poorer for that. And sadly, this warped theology now *dominates* the modern church.

The modern pulpit has replaced men of God, anointed by the Holy Spirit, who would thunder the Greatness and Worth and Value of God, and call sinners to humble themselves and repent, with motivational speakers who use human psychology to motivate people into "being all you can be". And so, concepts like "Human Free Will" and "Will-Power" and "Discipline" are lauded, while issues like Grace, and working through Faith to God's Glory, are left to the sidelines. The result is that the modern Church much more resembles a college pep rally where humanly engineered therapy develops various lists of "how to", rather than the House of God, where we can marvel at all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

The modern "pied-pipers" teach that we are changed by being presented with "5 steps on how to have a happy marriage", or "7 ways to increase love for your wife", or "13 ways to raise happy children", that rely on "human initiative" and "human self-will", rather than hearing the Word of God expounded so that the scales from our eyes are removed and we may behold the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ, and be changed into that same Image from one degree of glory to the next.

We must remember that it was the intoxication of being "great" that motivated Eve to sin when the serpent said:

... you will be like God...

.. and God forbade them to eat of the tree, even though it was "good for food," a "delight to the eyes", and "desired to make one wise". So, the great war within the modern, visible Church is *not* between heterosexuals and homosexuals, or between old hymns and contemporary music, or even between liberals and conservatives. No, the great war is between those who uphold and proclaim a "God-centered Gospel" and those who uphold and proclaim a "Man-centered" one.

And *nobody* exemplified the importance of having a "God-Centered" vision of all things better than the 18th Century Pastor and Theologian, Jonathan Edwards. What this man, whom I have never

met, has meant to me personally and to the lifeblood of this Church may never be known on this earth. But I am not exaggerating to say that had it not been for the Ministry of Jonathan Edwards and the impact his writings have made on me, I probably would not be here today, and many of you would not be here, either.

Now the verse that Brother Andy just read to you is where the writer of **Hebrews** instructs the people of the Christian Church to “remember”. And we are to remember people who have two characteristics:

1. Those who led you.
2. Those who spoke the Word of God to you.

And then the writer goes on to say that we are to “do” two things with those who led us and who spoke the Word of God to us:

1. Consider the result of their conduct
2. Imitate their faith

Now the way this is written in the original Greek tells me that the people we are to “remember” are dead, because the writer doesn’t say that we are to merely consider their conduct, but we are to consider the *result* of their conduct, and you simply cannot do that until the life of that person is over and there is no more conduct to consider. You see, because we are fallen creatures, as long as somebody is alive, they are able to destroy a lifetime of service and faithfulness. But after a person is dead and with the Lord, the result of his entire life can be considered and his faith imitated.

So, the Holy Bible teaches us that we are to have heroes of the Faith who are now dead, men who led the Church, and men who preached and taught the Word of God during their lives, and we are told to consider the end result of their conduct, and we are to then imitate or copy or emulate their faith. In fact, the writer of **Hebrews** thought this was so important that he included in his Epistle his own brief biographical sketch of several of the OT heroes of the faith, which is what we call today the 11th Chapter of **Hebrews**.

Now anytime you do something like this, there is a danger. And the danger is *not* that we might get some historical facts wrong or get

some dates mixed up, but that we will, even slightly, *replace* inerrant and infallible Scripture with the weak and frail *experiences* of other human beings, and that is always a danger, no matter how important those people may be.

And yet we see that the writer of **Hebrews** tells us right here to risk that danger and to go ahead and remember them. And that is why I took last Lord's day and am taking this Lord's day to preach a biography of one of the great heroes of the Christian Faith that I pray will be an inspiration to you and that will encourage you to take great risks in this radical Love of Jesus Christ.

Now one of the reasons that the world and this Church needs Jonathan Edwards over three hundred years after his birth is that his God-centered vision of all things is so rare, and yet so necessary. The American historian, 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’s perspective in American Christian history has been a tragedy.” (Noll, “Jonathan Edwards, Moral Philosophy, and the Secularization of American Christian Thought,” *Reformed Journal* [February 1983], 26)

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 megachurches and some public figures and political movements, give outward impressions of amazing vitality and strength. But David Wells 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,
- ✓ The wonders of Redemptive History,
- ✓ The magnificent Work of Redemption in Jesus 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,
- ✓ Our separation from worldliness,
- ✓ 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 what is called "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, terrifying, 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". The great Reformed writer, David 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" (*No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*, 300).

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-centered air does not take us out of 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.

For example, in 1735, Edwards preached a sermon on **Psalm 46:10** that says:

Be still and know that I am God.

From the biblical 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.” (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 2, 107*)

When Jonathan Edwards became still and contemplated 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 goes 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 anything 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.” (Ibid., 107–8)

When Jonathan Edwards became still and knew that God is God, the vision before his eyes was of an *absolutely* Sovereign God, *entirely* Self-sufficient in Himself, *all-sufficient* for His creatures, *infinite* in Holiness, and therefore *perfectly* Glorious, that is, *infinitely* Beautiful in all His Perfections. And it stunned him. And it changed him. And he never got over it.

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 He has to display His glorious Sufficiency (which is infinite). He does everything that He does, absolutely *everything*, for the sake of displaying His Glory.

And our duty and privilege, as believers then, is to struggle to humble ourselves and *conform* to this Divine Purpose in Creation and in History and in Redemption, namely, to reflect the Value of God’s Glory, to think and feel and do whatever we must to “make much of God”. So, our “reason for being”, our “calling”, and our “joy”, as saved souls, 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.”

This is the essence of Edwards’s God-centered 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, *to* Him, and *for* 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. And this is why I say that Edwards’s God-centered 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, at best, we waste our lives and, at worst, we actually fight against our Creator.

But how should we recover this God-centered vision of all things? First of all, by acknowledging the man. No one in all of Church History, that I am aware of, with the possible exception of Augustine, has shown more clearly and shockingly the infinite 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.

For many years of my Christian walk, Joy was always a *peripheral* issue. I thought we were supposed to do what God told us to do for no other reason than it was the “right thing to do”, and that using what the Bible actually taught as a motivation for my obedience was tantamount to serving God for “what I could get out of Him”. Until I read Jonathan Edwards.

Edwards simply transformed my universe by putting Joy at the very 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-centered people if we see

Joy the way Edwards saw Joy. 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.” (Ibid., emphasis added)

In other words, for God to be the holy and righteous God that He is, He must do several things:

- ✓ God must delight *infinitely* in what is infinitely *delightful*.
- ✓ God must enjoy with *unbounded* Joy what is most boundlessly *enjoyable*.
- ✓ God must take *infinite* Pleasure in what is infinitely Pleasant.
- ✓ God must love with *infinite* intensity what is infinitely Lovely.
- ✓ God must be *infinitely* satisfied with what is infinitely Satisfying.

So, what is it, Who is it, in all the Universe, that is:

- ✓ Infinitely Delightful
- ✓ Boundlessly Enjoyable
- ✓ Infinitely Pleasant
- ✓ Infinitely Lovely
- ✓ Infinitely Satisfying

... God is. Not, God plus something else. Just God, *all by Himself*. He is the only One that fills all these things.

And so, if God didn't know this, or if God acted as though this was not true, or if God placed this kind of Value on something else, including Man, He would be fraudulent. Claiming to be Wise, God would be a fool. And God would be “exchanging the Glory of God for

images". God's absolute Joy in Himself is part of what it means for God to be God.

Now, 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." ("Essay on the Trinity")

You simply 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, and that ultimate and infinite Joy is the Person of the Holy Spirit.

So, it is important to understand that when we speak of the place of Joy in our lives and in the Life of God, we are not playing games. We are not dealing with peripherals. We are dealing with an infinitely important Reality. And that means that Joy is at the heart of what it means for God to be God.

But 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. And what I am 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. . . God glorifies himself towards the creatures also [in] two ways: (1) by appearing to them, being manifested 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. . . . [W]hen 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." (*The "Miscellanies"*)

Now the implications of this paragraph for all of life are *immeasurable*. One of those implications is that the very End and Goal of Creation itself hangs on two things:

1. *Knowing* God with our minds
2. *Enjoying* God with our hearts

And that means that the very Purpose of the entire Universe, reflecting and displaying the Glory of God, hangs not only on the true Knowledge *of* God, but also on the authentic Joy *in* God.

“God is glorified not only by His Glory being seen,
but by it being rejoiced in.”

So, here is the great discovery that Edwards brought to me that changed everything. God is glorified *best*, the *most*, when I truly delight myself in Him. In other words, I do *not* bring Glory to God as best as I could and should by simply obeying Him. Because the motivation behind that is some form of “duty” or “obligation” which then brings honor and glory to me that I would go through such difficult things on earth based on my own will-power or discipline.

I only bring the maximum Glory to God by being so radically transformed (by what He alone did for me through the Life and Death and Resurrection of His Son) that I find the fullness of my own Joy in Him. And then my love for God and my service for God and my obedience to God is all wrapped up in my delight in Who God is.

So, I would suggest that the deepest *meaning* of the Westminster Catechism is *not* simply that the “chief end of Man” is to know God and to love God and to enjoy God forever, but rather:

To know God, to love God, by enjoying Him forever.

The great divide that I thought existed between God’s Passion for His Own Glory and my passion to be happy turned out to be no divide at all, as long as my passion for Joy is passion for joy *in God*. So, God’s Passion for the Glory of God, and my passion for Joy *in God*, is the same thing!

And what flows out 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 a focused passion and a determination and a vehemence that, if it must, would cut off our hand or gouge out our eye to have it. God being glorified in us hangs on our delight of Him. Which makes our being completely satisfied with Jesus to be *infinitely* important. It becomes the animating vocation of our lives.

And if you believe this, you will tremble at the horror of *not* rejoicing in God. You will quake at the fearful lukewarmness of your heart. You will awaken to the Truth that it is a treacherous sin not to pursue that Joy in God with all our hearts. And there is one word that encapsulates this concept of 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” (*Charity and Its Fruits*).

Of course, a passion for happiness can be misdirected to wrong objects, but, please hear me, a burning passion for happiness cannot ever be too strong. Edwards argued for this in a sermon that he preached on **The Song of Solomon 5:1**, which says:

“Eat, friends, drink, and imbibe deeply, O lovers!”

... and from that verse, he drew out the following doctrine:

“Persons need 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 allurements. . . . There is no such thing as excess in our taking of this spiritual food. There is no such virtue as temperance in spiritual feasting. (“The Spiritual Blessings of the Gospel Represented by a Feast”)

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.” (“The Spiritual Blessings of the Gospel Represented by a Feast”)

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-centered 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.

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 what he called the “joy of the hypocrite” and the “joy of the true Christian”. And it is a *devastating* distinction for many modern Christians because it exposes the error of defining God's Love as “making much of us.”

“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.*” (*The Religious Affections*, emphasis added)

So, the answer is “No!” Edwards’s call for a God-centered heart does not make us to be “central”. It makes God central. Indeed, it exposes every other joy as idolatrous that is not, ultimately, a Joy in God. As Augustine prayed:

“He loves Thee too little who loves anything together with Thee, which he loves not for Thy Sake” (Ibid., emphasis added).

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?

There are many Christians who 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.” (“The Pleasantness of Religion”)

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 defeat the lusts of the age while producing lovers of God, not legalists who boast in their own willpower and good works. If you love Holiness, if you weep over the moral collapse of our culture, I pray you will get to know Edwards's God-centered 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 to be the beginning.

The answer to this objection is that no one can feel brokenhearted for not treasuring God until he tastes the wondrous Pleasure of having God as his Treasure. In order to bring people to the sorrow of Repentance, you must first bring them to see God, in His Glory, 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 so ever 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.” (Ibid.)

This is astonishing, but it's 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 that are 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-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.” (Ibid.)

In other words, what many people call “self-denial” is simply another exercise of the fallen flesh of Man to do something to puff itself up and exalt itself against the Grace and mercy of God. The whole approach of the Bible, Edwards would say, is to persuade us that denying ourselves the “fleeting pleasures of sin” (**Hebrews 11:25**) puts us on the path of “pleasures forevermore” at God’s right hand (**Psalms 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.”

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” (Ibid.).

In other words, the only troubles that God *permits* in the lives of His children are those that will ultimately bring *more* Pleasure than trouble with them when all things are considered. And he cites four passages of Scripture:

Matthew 5:11-12

11 "Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.

12 "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

James 1:2-3

2 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials,

3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

The Acts 5:41

So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for *His* name.

Hebrews 10:34

For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one.

In other words, Yes, becoming a Christian *adds* more trouble to this 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.

Hebrews 12:2b

... who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame ...

Jesus fixed His Gaze on the completion of His Joy. And 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-centered vision of all things.

Objection #6: *Did not Edwards extol the virtue of "disinterested love" to God? How could love to God which 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, when he said:

"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." (*Original Sin*)

"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." (*Charity and Its Fruits*)

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 a love which delights in God for His Own Greatness and Beauty, and to distinguish it from a love that delights only in God's gifts. So, "Disinterested love" is *not* a 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.” (*Religious Affections*)

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.

Objection #7: 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, but not because that's what it means. This Truth about Joy in God can be distorted because *any* Truth can be distorted and misused. But if that happens, it will not be the fault of Jonathan Edwards. The God-centered 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.” (*Religious Affections*)

The God-centered vision of Jonathan Edwards is so rare today. But it is also so needed, 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 Corinthians 6:10**).

Amen. Let's pray.

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The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Be watchful and quicken your pace. Soli Deo Gloria. For the Glory of God alone.