

THE BIOGRAPHY OF  
REV. JONATHAN EDWARDS, D.D.

Born: October 5, 1703  
East Windsor Hill, South Windsor, Connecticut  
Died: March 22, 1758  
Princeton University, New Jersey

LIFE SPAN: 54 years, 5 months, 17 days

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Robert Edwards Ellison, (7th generation grandson)  
Compuserve ID # 70702,533  
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THE DREAM OF MOST PREACHERS is to have the proper balance of knowledge and zeal, brain and brawn, faith and works, head and heart. If there ever was such a preacher it would be Edwards.

Many theologians and Bible teachers would strike out in a soul-winning ministry. Likewise, many who turn others to righteousness could seldom score a point in defending the faith in some tribunal. But Jonathan Edwards' combination of reason and passion causes many to believe America never knew a preacher who excelled in both areas as Edwards did.

His story begins with his heritage. His father, Timothy, was pastor of the local Congregational church for 64 years. His mother, Esther, who died in 1770, was the daughter of Solomon Stoddard, pastor of the church in Northampton, Massachusetts for over 50 years--the same church that Jonathan Edwards would some day pastor.

Edwards was the fifth child and only son among eleven children. He grew up in an atmosphere of Puritan piety, affection and learning.

At six he studied Latin. By age seven, he had some encounter with God. He had a rigorous schedule of schooling at home. At age nine he composed a brief paper on the nature of souls. His first recorded interest in spiritual things came at ten during a revival at his father's church. He and his playmates built a "prayer booth" in a swamp. Often he and his chums talked to God in the woods. At twelve he wrote about revival like a seasoned saint.

He later also wrote his famous essay on the spider, which became a pioneer work in the history of American natural science. This essay, written shortly before he went to college, exhibits his remarkable powers of observation and analysis.

He habitually studied with pen in hand, recording his thoughts in numerous hand-sewn notebooks.

He entered Yale University when not quite 13 years of age in the Fall of 1716. Before going to Yale he was acquainted with Latin, Greek and Hebrew, having a working knowledge of the same under the tutorship of father and four older sisters. The school was then called Collegiate School of Connecticut.

As such, the school had no certain home, and much of Edwards' course was spent in Weathersfield, Connecticut, but before he graduated, the college had ceased wandering. During his second year in college he read with profit Locke's Essay on the Human Understanding. He graduated valedictorian of his class from the New Haven campus (YALE) in September, 1720, receiving his B.A.

He remained at New Haven for two years after this, studying divinity subjects. He was licensed to preach in mid-1722. He absorbed himself with theology, and became one of the great philosophers and theologians of the ages.

About this time came an incident that gave him assurance about his salvation. He had always thought himself a Christian from childhood days. While meditating one day on I Timothy 1:17 the truth hit him. There came into his soul "a sense of the glory of the Divine Being." He thought, "How excellent a Being that was, and how happy I should be if I might enjoy that God...and be as it were swallowed up in Him forever." That's exactly what happened. Prior to this he struggled with God's absolute sovereignty, but now it was "exceedingly pleasant, bright and sweet."

He then took an eight-month pastorate in New York City in a Presbyterian church (August 1722 to April 1723). One source says he left the church May 21, 1724, to September, 1726. On January 12, 1723, he entered into his diary, "I made salvation the main business of my life." He also made a resolution, "Never to do any manner of things, whether in soul or body, less, but what tends to the glory of God..." He returned to Yale as a tutor from 1724 to September, 1726, receiving his M.A. degree in September, 1723.

He became a distinguished scholar and a preacher of great ability and his services were sought by several churches. February 15, 1727, he became ordained and joined his grandfather as associate pastor.

On July 28, he married Sarah Pierrepont of New Haven. The bride was but seventeen but possessed an unusual degree of tact and sweetness of character, and proved a most valuable helpmate to the young minister. Their home life was ideal.

George Whitefield, while visiting them in 1740, was so impressed that he wrote in glowing terms of their ideal marriage. Eleven children were born to them, eight daughters and three sons. The children were Sarah, the eldest (1728), who would marry Elisha Parsons in June, 1750; Jerusha (1731), who died in 1748, just a few months following the death of the man she loved, David Brainerd; Esther (1732), who would later marry Aaron Burr, Princeton's first president, and have a child, Aaron, Jr., who would be a major political figure (Vice President), in the early history of the new American nation.

Esther Edwards Burr died on April 7, 1758, just two weeks after the death of her father, from the same smallpox inoculation that took his life--and only seven months after her own husband's passing. Then there was Mary, who later married Timothy Dwight of Northampton in November, 1750, who became parents of the famed educator of Yale, Timothy Dwight Jr. Other children of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards were: Lucy, Timothy (1738), Sussanah, Eunice, Jonathan (March 26, 1745), who became a great preacher in his own right; Elizabeth; and Pierrepont, their youngest and last, born in April, 1750, became a member of Continental Congress, a founder of the Connecticut Western Reserve (now a good part of the State of Ohio), and the first U.S. District Court Judge, and first Grandmaster of Masons for Connecticut. A 12th child died in infancy. Ten of these children survived Edwards.

The Edwards family tree has produced scores of preachers, university presidents and men of the highest character in many fields, for example, Pierrepont's son, Henry became Governor of Connecticut (1833-1834,

1836-1837). It might be noted that Sarah's father, Rev. James Pierrepont, (actually Duke of Portland, Baron Pierrepont. although he never returned to Nottingham England, to claim his inheritance)- was the pastor in New Haven from 1685 to 1714,.

When Stoddard died on February 11, 1729, Edwards became the pastor of the most important church in Massachusetts except for Boston. For over 20 years he was to have one of the more renown and God-blessed pastorates in history. His first published sermon was one given in Boston on July 8, 1731, titled, God Glorified in the Work of Redemption by the Greatness of Man's Dependence upon Him, in the Whole of It. Edwards blamed New England's moral ills on its assumption of religious and moral self-sufficiency. Thus began his lifelong fight against rationalism.

Edwards worked hard, spending as much as thirteen hours a day in his study. Northampton was a small city of wealth and culture. At the same time there was a good deal of vulgarity and looseness of life to undermine morals. By 1734 he was openly attacking Arminianism which was becoming popular. Then came a series of sermons in November of 1734 on the theme "Justification by Faith Alone."

At once half a dozen people were converted. One was a young woman, a natural leader among the young people of the town, who had been living a notorious and dissipated life. Edwards had not heard of her conversion until she came to his study, in humble penitence, to converse with him about her soul. As news of the conversion spread through the town, many others, both old and young, acknowledged that God alone could produce so sudden and marked a change in such a life.

This news spread to other towns and numerous revivals broke out in other places throughout New England and continued for several years. A great revival broke out in the winter and spring of 1734-35, during which time there were more than 300 professions of faith. This was about half of the 670 membership.

As he went about his visitation, Edwards carried a burden for souls and his words fell with authority of the Holy Spirit upon them. He spoke in a quiet, calm tone, unlike the stormy type, but inspiration and warmth were felt.

He recorded some of his accounts during this time in a book called Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God (1737).

The awakening in 1740-41 throughout the colonies was led by evangelist George Whitefield, (a close family friend). Pastors like Gilbert Tennent in New Jersey and Jonathan Edwards in Massachusetts, provided the climate for Whitefield's preaching. Edwards surely was the spiritual father of the

"first great awakening," for New England is where it started. New England's population was about 300,000 and it is estimated some 60,000 were saved during this period, a half of these being previously unconverted church members.

Heavenly power swept from Northampton to 150 towns and cities of New England. For 20 years the revival fires blazed and from them sprang 120 new churches!

Edwards kept his congregation free from violent emotional reactions as was happening some places. However, on several occasions, he was right in the middle of such happenings. His sermon, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, first preached at Enfield, Connecticut, on Sunday, July 8, 1741, has long been recognized as one of the great sermons of history. During the previous night godly women had prayed for a spiritual visitation. It came.

A special service had been called for by a group of ministers with Edwards as the speaker for the afternoon session. As the ministers entered the meeting place, they were shocked by the levity of the congregation.

They appeared thoughtless and vain, and hardly conducted themselves with common decency.

As Edwards preached, he used no gestures but stood motionless. His left elbow leaned on the pulpit, and his left hand held his notes. His text was, Deuteronomy 32:35, 'their foot shall slide in due time!'

Strong men held onto their seats, feeling they were sliding into hell! Men shook, some losing their reason. His words would so grip the audience that they felt, should he cease speaking, the doom he pronounced would immediately come upon them.

He flashed before the people the fiery prospects of eternal damnation, as hell was a living reality to him. Yet, unlike Whitefield, he did it with calm tones. So vivid was his imagination that he could graphically picture the eternal torments of the lost. The theme of the message was, "The God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over a fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked."

Men and women stood up and rolled on the floor, their cries once drowning out the voice of the preacher. Some are said to have laid hold on the pillars and braces of the church, apparently feeling that at that very moment their feet were sliding, that they were being precipitated into Hell.

Through the night, Enfield was like a beleaguered city. In almost every house, men and women could be heard crying out for God to save them. Before it was all over 500 were saved in the community that day.

Someone has said about that sermon, "New England might forgive it, but she could never forget it."

The revival spirit continued for years to come, despite much controversy concerning it. Criticism came naturally from high-brow and near atheistic places. However many Christians criticized the excesses, disorders and civil disruptions associated with the revival. Edwards personally rebuked Whitefield for some of this, but as a whole maintained that it was the work of God to be furthered and purified. He wrote several books defending what God was doing, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741), *Thoughts on the Revival* (1742), and *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746), a book in which he attempted to answer the question, "What is the nature of true religion?" A close friendship with David Brainerd began in September, 1743, and ended in 1747, as Edwards conducted his funeral.

In the backlash of the revival the people of Northampton were left exhausted and irritable. Edwards was accused of haughtiness, his family of extravagance of dress. In March, 1744, he alienated many of the leading citizens by the way he conducted an investigation into certain activities of their children, who were supposed to have circulated books with indecent speech.

He also attacked the custom of "bundling," where young courting people fully clothed would lie in bed. He charged, "It is one of those things that lead and expose to sin." He also called upon the youth to stop attending worldly amusements such as the dance. His popularity began to decline when he began stepping on toes. His position was correct, but perhaps he did not exercise great skill in handling people. For example, from the pulpit he read a list of those who were to meet a church-appointed committee of inquiry, not distinguishing between those who were to appear as witnesses and those who were accused.

However, the big issue for many years was the "Half-Way Covenant" that Edwards said was wrong. Stoddard for many years had instituted a practice of admitting to the Lord's Supper ordinance all who were "in the covenant" even though they were not converted. This meant if your parents or grandparents were "in the faith" you could participate. People then considered themselves as Christians, with the Lord's Supper becoming the saving ordinance. In essence, this was filling the church with unsaved people. Not only the Lord's

Supper, but baptism was involved. This covenant allowed baptized parents to have their own children baptized, regardless of whether they or the children were converted.

Edwards' abhorrence of shallow revivalism and emotional excesses caused him to insist that a real conversion meant living a responsible, moral life; hence, he began to tighten up the requirements for church membership. This caused opposition in the Northampton congregation.

Edwards simply came to the conclusion that a born-again experience was necessary--not mere doctrinal knowledge, godly parents or a moral life--in order to have communion. In 1749 he publicly declared these matters, insisting on some statement as to conversion and convictions, refusing to administer the Lord's Supper to those not willing to declare their faith or live a Christian life. The church and town rebelled, and after a controversy of exceeding bitterness, Edwards was fired on June 22, 1750, by a vote of 230 to 23.

On July 2, 1750, he preached his Farewell Sermon. Edwards wrote two books defending his position, *Qualifications for Communion* (1749) and *A Reply to Solomon Williams* (1752), who was a pastor at Lebanon, Connecticut. Edwards' position was vindicated later and facilitated the separation of church and state after the Revolution. Years later many of his parishioners wrote him, asking for forgiveness.

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