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Chapter 1



A HAPPY BEGINNING

The man who would stand tall in history began life in a minister's home in East Windsor, Connecticut, a small town on the east side of the Connecticut River and in the central north of the state. The date was October 5, 1703. Jonathan was the fifth child born to the Reverend Timothy Edwards and Esther Stoddard Edwards. Timothy was a gifted pastor and a good father to his family. He took a special interest in Jonathan, for the two of them formed the entirety of the family's male contingent. Jonathan had no less than ten sisters with whom he got along well. Between the busy life of a New England pastor and the bustle of a crowded home, the family led a full and happy life.

Jonathan's parents were devoted Christians. His father was a well-respected minister and his mother's father, Solomon Stoddard, was a pastor in Northampton, Massachusetts, and one of the eminent figures of the Connecticut River Valley. It is difficult to picture today, but in colonial New England some three centuries ago, pastors were the leaders of society. Unlike the current day, when the pastor enjoys less respect in society than in previous generations, these clergy possessed significant cultural influence, watched over churches that included most members of a given town, and understood the pastorate as a sacred calling.

Though they related to their people in various ways, they

were not primarily administrators, folksy storytellers, or isolated intellectuals. They perceived themselves to be shepherds over God's flock, those who were responsible for the survival and flourishing of God's people. Preaching constituted the means by which such nourishment flowed from God to people, as did careful church oversight involving church discipline and observation of the sacred ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper). With such a spiritual diet, the colonists of New England were equipped to live in a hard world of taxing labor, frequent sickness, and early death.

In a society that highly respected preachers and called them to a high standard, Solomon Stoddard was a titan. His congregation was huge, he was a theological authority, and he possessed the bearing of a statesman. To say that Jonathan was born into the line of preachers, then, is no small claim. More accurately, he was born into New England royalty, and he was expected from a young age to pursue the Lord, the ministry, and the application of his considerable gifts in his life's work. He was raised in the church and was trained to view it as the theater of the supernatural, the arena in which God's glory shone through the proclaimed Word and the poured-out Spirit. The pastor was at the center of this divine drama. To the perceptive young mind of Jonathan Edwards, his father possessed the ability as a minister to move his people and draw them close to the Lord through preaching. Visits to Grandfather's church in Northampton would only have magnified such an observation as the little boy observed the gathering of hundreds on a weekly basis for worship under Stoddard's magisterial direction.

YOUNG JONATHAN'S SERIOUSNESS

Between the boy's natural gifts and his impressive lineage, it seemed clear to many that young Jonathan had a date with a

pastoral destiny in the near future. In time, and with much training, he would meet his destiny and take the office of colonial pastor to a height unknown by either father or grandfather. He would not do so, however, without considerable preparation for his future ministry. In colonial America, this meant academic study from an early age—six in Jonathan’s case. At an age when children today barely know the alphabet, Jonathan began the study of Latin under the tutelage of his father, who supplemented his pastoral income by tutoring boys preparing for college. Jonathan mastered Latin and progressed to Greek and Hebrew by age twelve. His intellectual ability was matched by his irrepressible spiritual fire. He later reflected that in this period:

I, with some of my schoolmates joined together, and built a booth in a swamp, in a very secret and retired place, for a place of prayer. And besides, I had particular secret places of my own in the woods, where I used to retire by myself; and used to be from time to time much affected. (*Works* 16, 791)

Though Jonathan had not at this time cried out for salvation, he was clearly engaged in religious activity—activity prompted, no doubt, by the example of his godly parents. At this point in his life, however, Christianity was more an exercise to be performed than a faith to be experienced. Though he did speak of emotional stirrings when spiritually engaged, it seems that a true work of grace had not yet inhabited his heart and saved his soul. The young Edwards was quite serious about Christianity but had not yet tasted the miracle of conversion.

Jonathan’s seriousness extended into areas that were ignored by others of his age. Well before he wrote his famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” he showed an early sensitivity to the reality of death. In a cheerful letter to his sister Mary, written in 1716 when just twelve, Jonathan reported:

There has five persons died in this place since you have been gone . . . Goodwife Rockwell, old Goodwife Grant, and Benjamin Bancroft, who was drowned in a boat many rods from shore, wherein were four young women and many others of the other sex, which were very remarkably saved, and the two others which died I suppose you have heard of. (*Works* 16, 29)

Residents of colonial New England were more accustomed to the frequency of death than we are today. Yet we glimpse a particular awareness of the realm beyond this one in Jonathan's letter. His tone is not dark or foreboding, but he clearly understands the nearness of death. Raised by his father and mother to acknowledge and confront difficult realities, Jonathan was able from a young age to look deeper and clearer into his world than peers who sought simply to pass the time.

THE SCHOLARLY LIFE BEGINS

When the time came to attend university, the natural choice was the Connecticut Collegiate School, known to us today as Yale University, located in New Haven, some fifty-four miles from East Windsor. In 1716, when Jonathan entered a branch of the school in Wethersfield, his class consisted of twelve other young men. The teacher was his cousin, Elisha Williams. The course consisted mainly of reading, memorization, written work, and recitations. The emphasis in the 1700s was more on rote learning and recital than on discussion and lecture. The course of study could be grueling, and students spent many hours in small rooms and hard chairs memorizing their texts.

Jonathan's capacity for logical thought, clear writing, and sharp analysis of an argument developed during this time. In Wethersfield and later New Haven, the young Edwards also indulged his great appetite for theology during his years at Yale,

reading classics such as the Puritan William Ames's *The Marrow of Theology*, and other texts that shaped his thinking.

Jonathan's four years at Yale were full of hard work and contemplative intellectual formation. Reading, reflection, and writing would be integral to his life for the remainder of his days. Though a young man with few responsibilities, he devoted himself to the cultivation of his mind. "I am sensible of the preciousness of my time," he wrote his father in 1719, "and am resolved it shall not be through any neglect of mine, if it slips through without the greatest advantage" (*Works* 16, 32). His devotion paid off in September 1720, at the end of his bachelor's degree, when Jonathan graduated as the valedictorian of his class. He delivered a valedictory address in Latin and prepared himself for the next phase of his education, a master's degree, then the highest academic degree attainable.

Jonathan was now a man. In his young life, he had accomplished much and impressed many. He had charted an excellent course for himself and had honored his parents and tutors. Yet he had not tasted the beauty of living for God in repentant, joyful trust. His life was full and good, his mind was sharp, but the dawn was yet to break. In coming days, a strange and wonderful light would shine in Jonathan's heart, transforming a young, scholarly, religious student into a God-intoxicated man.



Following Edwards

A Well-Led Home

Jonathan Edwards's full and happy life did not come out of a vacuum. He grew up in a home that cultivated faith, just as a gardener cultivates healthy plants. He was raised in a home that was devoted to the Lord through the leadership of his father and

mother. With the help of his wife, Jonathan's father trained his children to embrace the realities of life in a fallen world and to prepare their souls for the world beyond. When the husband exercises spiritual leadership in this way, and works together with his wife to raise his children in Christian faith, his children will learn to confront hard truths, to take spiritual things seriously, and to pursue the Lord with passion. Though this spiritual preparation might seem unimportant compared to other things, it is in fact the greatest gift that parents can provide their children.

The Importance of Worship to the Family

The Edwards family made worship a fundamental priority. Though not all fathers are pastors like Timothy, all dads can lead their families in worship. Parents can set a pattern for their children in which worship is not an obligation or a chore, but an exciting, life-transforming privilege. The church of God would greatly benefit today from parents that celebrate worship and church involvement like Timothy and Esther Edwards did.

Prioritizing Education

Like the Edwardses, our parenting should also give priority to the educational formation of our children. This will involve emphasizing the importance of a Christian worldview that prizes the life of the mind and that embraces diligent study of numerous fields. No matter what our children go on to do in life, they can honor the Lord by approaching learning with discipline and passion. Enthusiastic parental support for education from an early age will set them on a course to do so.

Chapter 2



THE JOYS OF NEW BIRTH

After earning his bachelor's degree, seventeen-year-old Jonathan Edwards plunged into his master's degree. Though he wanted to go into the ministry, he was too young to be a pastor and he thought it wise to further cultivate his mind. Edwards's continued preparation equipped him to be a pastor who could handle the difficult intellectual challenges of his day. This approach was common in the 1700s, as future pastors sought rigorous preparation for the demands of pastoral ministry. If they were to be leaders of church and society, authorities in a wide variety of fields, able teachers of the Word, they needed excellent academic preparation. The pastor-theologians, as they are called, sensed the high calling of the pastorate and shaped themselves accordingly. Thus for Jonathan, the master's degree was an essential step in preparing for God's work.

“WRAPT UP TO GOD IN HEAVEN”: CONVERSION

In his master's work, Jonathan found that he had more time to mull over the Bible he was studying. Always a contemplative person, he enjoyed meditating on Scripture. One day in the spring of 1721, Edwards pondered 1 Timothy 1:17 (KJV): “Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God,

be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.” In the course of this spiritual exercise, one of thousands experienced in his life to this point, something happened. While silently walking along, a thunderclap struck in Jonathan’s heart. He later said of that instance:

As I read the words, there came into my soul, and as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the divine being; a new sense, quite different from anything I ever experienced before. Never any words of Scripture seemed to me as these words did. I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was; and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be wrapt up to God in heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in him. (*Works* 16, 792–3)

This sensation of being “swallowed up” in God erupted into a fresh love for Jesus Christ:

From about that time, I began to have a new kind of apprehension and ideas of Christ, and the work of redemption, and the glorious way of salvation by him. I had an inward, sweet sense of these things, that at times came into my heart; and my soul was led away in pleasant views and contemplations of them. And my mind was greatly engaged, to spend my time in reading and meditating on Christ; and the beauty and excellency of his person, and the lovely way of salvation, by free grace in him. (*Works*, 16, 793)

Though he never formally said it, this was Jonathan’s conversion experience. He had grown up with Scripture and had been studying it academically for years. He knew it very well and attempted to obey its moral and spiritual guidelines. As important as knowledge and obedience are, neither can save the soul and transform

the heart. One must acquire what Jonathan later called the “true sense” of God for conversion to take place:

A true sense of the divine and superlative excellency of the things of religion; a real sense of the excellency of God and Jesus Christ, and of the work of redemption, and the ways and works of God revealed in the gospel. There is a divine and superlative glory in these things; an excellency that is of a vastly higher kind, and more sublime nature than in other things; a glory greatly distinguishing them from all that is earthly and temporal. He that is spiritually enlightened truly apprehends and sees it, or has a sense of it. He does not merely rationally believe that God is glorious, but he has a sense of the gloriousness of God in his heart. There is not only a rational belief that God is holy, and that holiness is a good thing, but there is a sense of the loveliness of God’s holiness. There is not only a speculatively judging that God is gracious, but a sense how amiable God is upon that account, or a sense of the beauty of this divine attribute. (*Works* 17, 413)

Jonathan attained this “true sense” while he walked the campus of Yale, pondering the first chapter of 1 Timothy. He suddenly realized in a personal way the majesty, excellency, and greatness of Jesus Christ. He became for Edwards the fountain of beauty and the purpose of life. Once ten thousand miles away, now He was near.

Jonathan would never again study God abstractly. From this moment on, he would enjoy Him. He would seek to know the Lord, a journey that involved the full capacity of his mind, emotions, and soul. Jonathan’s life would not be easy from this point forward, and he sometimes doubted his salvation, but his commitment would never fade.

THE SWEETNESS OF MEDITATION AND THE REALITY OF HEAVEN

A year passed in Jonathan's life, one filled with academic work and tutoring of undergraduate students at Yale. In the summer of 1722, though immersed in his studies, Jonathan was called by an English Presbyterian congregation in New York City—a city then housing about ten thousand residents, many of whom engaged in the booming sea trade. He agreed to serve as pastor of the little church, which had divided over its previous pastor. In the course of Edwards's year in New York, the congregation healed its wounds and called the former minister, James Anderson, back to the pulpit.

Though his stay in the city was brief, Jonathan's passion for the Lord only intensified while in New York. He thought much about heaven and later reflected on his contemplation: "The heaven I desired was a heaven of holiness; to be with God, and to spend my eternity in divine love, and holy communion with Christ. My mind was very much taken up with contemplations on heaven, and the enjoyments of those there; and living there in perfect holiness, humility and love." Jonathan's delight in heaven sometimes overwhelmed him as:

The inward ardor of my soul, seemed to be hindered and pent up, and could not freely flame out as it would. I used often to think, how in heaven, this sweet principle should freely and fully vent and express itself. Heaven appeared to me exceeding delightful as a world of love. It appeared to me, that all happiness consisted in living in pure, humble, heavenly, divine love. (*Works* 16, 795–6)

For many Christians, heaven is a matter-of-fact reality, the logical end to the Christian life. Jonathan, however, sought to look deeply into the life to come. He knew from Scripture that heaven

was a place of perfect holiness, a “world of love.” Jonathan knew that while unceasing holiness and happiness prove evasive on this earth, heaven promised the believer absolute purity and joy. If young Jonathan had a faraway look on his daily walks by the Hudson River, it was because he was thinking of another place.

Jonathan knew that heaven was not a fairy tale mystery. For Jonathan, the unseen mysteries of the faith, including heaven, were no less real than earthly life. Earthly life was merely a shadow of that to come. In his quest to live well for the Lord, the young Christian focused on the realm where He resided.

HOLY LIVING AND THE RESOLUTIONS OF ACTION

As he pondered weighty matters like heaven, Jonathan kept a record of his thoughts. Over the course of his life, he compiled over fourteen hundred reflections on doctrine, philosophy, Scripture, and other intellectual interests. Called the “Miscellanies,” these reflections feature the young thinker’s perspectives on the apocalypse, the workings of the mind, science, and scriptural passages, among many other subjects. Jonathan also kept a diary at times, recording the activities and key events of his daily life. He loved to study and to think about his life and world. But he was not lost in the clouds. Jonathan excelled at putting his contemplative faith to practice. His deep thinking did not weaken his decision-making and his capacity to act. No, it fueled it.

At the same time that Jonathan was meditating on heaven, he assembled for himself a list of spiritual “resolutions” by which to live. His resolutions, seventy in number and compiled over several months, laid out definitive ways in which Jonathan could put his passion and theology into practice. The young man who sought to meditate deeply tried with similar zeal to live “holily,” as he put it.

The first resolution centered on the glory of God and the duty to reflect it:

Resolved, that I will do whatsoever I think to be most to God's glory, and my own good, profit and pleasure, in the whole of my duration, without any consideration of the time, whether new, or never so many myriads of ages hence. Resolved to do whatever I think to be my duty, and most for the good and advantage of mankind in general. (*Works* 15, 795)

Living for God in pursuit of beauty and joy did not mean a leisurely, airy existence. It meant action that resulted in "God's glory" and Jonathan's "own good." Though he certainly practiced his faith in a fallen way, as all Christians do, Jonathan sought to use all his ability to give God all the glory. This meant a fusion of faith, thought, and action all directed to a doxological end.

Jonathan's aims were not rooted in pride, but they were certainly broad. As a young man, he charted a plan for his life. His sixth resolution vowed that he would live with vigor: "Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live." History often pictures Edwards as a dry scholar. But he was not a weak or wimpy man. He possessed purpose and energy. He lived a spiritually ambitious life marked by purposeful, focused labor. His resolutions, made when he was very young but remembered throughout his life, fueled all of this activity.

The disciplined Christian life was for Jonathan saturated by the gospel. Resolution eighteen made this clear: "Resolved, to live so at all times, as I think is best in my devout frames, and when I have clearest notions of things of the gospel, and another world." If his intellect, status, or spiritual achievements loomed large in his mind, Jonathan knew that his focus would shift. He would live to be admired or to become famous or to be envied. Such ungodly ambitions would drive his decisions and lead him away from the Savior. If he lived with the gospel in view, though, he would remember his depravity and the grace of God. He would center all of his life and activity on honoring his Savior and

on living a life reflective of the gospel. Instead of drifting away from the truth, he would stay the course.

Early in his life, Jonathan sought to twist his whole being into a tool in the hands of God. He wanted to constantly grow as a Christian. Resolution thirty captured this desire: “Resolved, to strive to my utmost every week to be brought higher in religion, and to a higher exercise of grace, than I was the week before” (*Works* 16, 755). Jonathan knew that if he did not pursue the Lord, he would not grow as a believer. Though he set a rigorous pace, he positioned himself to experience the full blessings of life as a Christian. He desired a life that constantly bore spiritual fruit, just as a tree bears physical fruit in seasons of health. Jonathan knew that the Lord would use such a life in this world for significant ends.

In mapping out his resolutions, Jonathan realized before turning twenty what it takes many people a lifetime to discover: living for God matters more than anything else. In order to accomplish this aim, Jonathan mapped out a plan for his life that would shape his brief time on earth. Because he lived in this way, his life drew the favor of God. In time, it lit up colonial New England like a comet in the night.



Following Edwards

The Power of Meditating on Heaven and God's Truth

Jonathan often meditated on the reality of heaven. Though the scriptural doctrine of heaven is shrouded in layers of mystery, and we possess little material by which to figure out what life in the new heavens and earth will look like, Jonathan serves as a model for us in his attempt to set his thoughts on his eternal home. Just as Jonathan stoked the passions of his heart by meditating

on heaven, so too can Christians today reflect on the wonderful truths of the Christian faith. We may not express ourselves as Jonathan did, and we may not experience the level of emotion that he did, but we all can lift ourselves up out of the doldrums of daily existence by peeking into the realities of the gospel.

As we drive to our job, or work around the home, or go to school, we can memorize a biblical verse and meditate on it. As we turn over scriptural truths in our minds, we will see them in a fresh light. The Bible will come to life when we view it as a life-transforming gift from a loving Creator (Ps. 119). The person and work of Jesus Christ will shine with glory when we contemplate the hugeness of our sin problem (Rom. 3). Heaven won't be so mysterious, for example, if we think about how God will rule us in perfect love there (Rev. 21–22). If we would take snatches of our day and devote them to reflection as Jonathan did, we would find a deeper and more satisfying walk with Christ that would redeem not only our time, but also our hearts and minds.

Meditation Followed by Action

One might be worried that if one goes through with all of this meditating, we'll lose our place in the real world—maybe it sounds like we're suggesting that Christians should walk through life on an airy cloud. While that does sound comfortable, we really want to know the quiet satisfaction of thinking on God. But we also hope to encourage a life of practical action. The first, in fact, fuels the second. The more we think about the deep things of the faith, the more we'll love God, and the greater our desire for holiness and spiritual action will be. Just like Jonathan, who drew up his steps for holiness and action in his “Resolutions,” we too can set some spiritual goals for ourselves. We don't need to be legalistic about these goals, and we don't even have to write them down. But we could sketch out some scriptural attitudes and actions that we need to cultivate—the fruit of the

Spirit, for example (Gal. 5:22–23)—and lay out some guidelines for ourselves by which to develop these attitudes. Doing so is not legalistic; it’s wise, and godly, for the authors of Scripture constantly did this in their letters and writings to the people of God. It will help us to remember the sort of life that we seek as a Christian and will turn us away from sin in moments when we feel like we have lost our way.