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CHAPTER 1



A Happy Beginning

*T*he 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 the central north of the state. The date was October 5, 1703. Jonathan was the fifth child born to the Rev. 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 hard to picture today, but in colonial New England some three centuries ago, pastors were the leaders of society. Unlike the current day, when the work of the pastor enjoys little respect in society, 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 that 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 in the line of preachers, then, is no small claim. More accurately, he was born into New England roy-

alty, 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 he 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 no doubt prompted 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 that:

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 hard 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 54 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, in contrast to the contemporary

classroom. 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 a part of 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.



Applying Edwards's Life and Ideas

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.