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CHAPTER ONE



*The Disappearance  
of the Afterlife*



THOSE-DYING THEN,  
Knew where they went—  
They went to God's Right Hand—  
That Hand is amputated now  
And God cannot be found—

The abdication of Belief  
Makes the Behavior small—  
Better an ignis fatuus  
Than no illumine at all—

(Norton, 2383)

Jonathan Edwards did not write these words. They were composed by Emily Dickinson. Dickinson, one of America's greatest poets of the nineteenth century, wrote the brief and untitled poem in a different cultural climate than Edwards's. The American colonies had become a nation. The Industrial Revolution had transformed daily life. Most pertinent to the poem, many pastors had embraced the popular academic spirit that effectively deemphasized the historic doctrines of orthodox Christianity.

The Christian faith as experienced by many church members had changed, too. Where Christians had once emphasized in the glories of heaven and the terrors of hell, many professing believers in Dickinson's era suffered an apparent "abdication of Belief." They no longer subscribed to the awesome truths of immortality. Instead, they busied themselves with the things of this world. Dickinson, though not an avid churchgoer herself, lamented this situation and the impoverished moral behavior it produced.

The same problem that Dickinson observed many years ago belongs to our age. Many believers and churches do not reflect deeply on the age to come. Evangelicalism as a whole seems to have shifted focus from the life to come to life in this world. This has the unfortunate consequence of diminishing the importance of ultimate realities.

The call to preach the need for salvation and the prospect of the afterlife proceeds from the Scripture. In one section from the book of Ezekiel, the Lord thunders to Ezekiel, His

prophet, to do just this, warning him of the dire consequences of failure on this point:

SO YOU, SON OF MAN, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. (Ezekiel 33:7–9)

Though the passage does not mention heaven and hell, it shows that the Lord holds His shepherds and prophets responsible for declaring His message of salvation. The prophets were divinely called to warn the people of God of the reality of judgment and the need to reconcile themselves to their Creator and Judge. The prophet did not choose whether or not to highlight these things. The people, for their part, were not free to pick and choose which parts of the prophet's message they liked best.

Much has changed since Ezekiel's day, when every person could not help but come face to face with both their mortality and the truth of the afterlife. We feel this shift keenly in the West, where various factors push against the biblical

teaching on the afterlife. In the broader culture, hell, especially, is a relic of a severe past, an idea that few people seriously entertain. Heaven, on the other hand, retains popularity, though what heaven actually looks like in the minds of many has changed dramatically. In Christian circles, though many believers retain belief in heaven and hell, the practical reality is that this earth often has more significance for many of us than does the afterlife.

To begin to rectify this situation, we must first understand how we have arrived at this place. We will do so in this first chapter. We will briefly tour our cultural history, examining how belief in the afterlife has changed and decreased over the last few centuries. After we have traced the decline of belief in the afterlife, we will turn to the writing and thinking of Jonathan Edwards in pursuit of a biblical eschatological vision. The colonial New England pastor-theologian devoted a great deal of attention to the afterlife and penned numerous pieces that called for his audience to reckon with the prospect of eternity in either heaven or hell. These pieces, whether sermons to his congregation, theological treatises, or letters to his children, illustrate his convictions and will revive our own. Through study of them, we will see that Edwards wrote and preached on the need to prepare one's soul for death not because he was a killjoy, but because he loved his people deeply and wanted them to avoid wrath and taste eternal life.

## A Brief Cultural History of Belief in the Afterlife

Our remarks on this point can only be brief as we provide a sketch of the decline of belief in hell in our society. As we will see, the story of widespread loss of faith in the afterlife parallels the larger story of cultural unbelief.

As noted in the introduction, the vast majority of people in the history of the world believed in a dualistic afterlife. For much of the last two millennia in the West, Catholicism and Protestantism have held sway over the minds and hearts of the common people. Though these two strands of Christianity have significant differences, each has traditionally taught that heaven and hell exist. Taking this teaching from the Bible, church leaders passed it on to their followers, who in turn accepted the teaching as truth. They had no perception as many of us do that they were choosing one worldview option among many. Rather, the biblical teaching as mediated by their church leaders was fact, and they were required by God to believe His Word.

Popular views of hell in the Middle Ages, for example, were often visceral and horrifying, far removed from our sanitized modern conceptions, as historian Piero Camporesi shows:

THE "SEPULCHRE OF HELL", "with its fetid corpses which were indissolubly linked to hundreds of others", this "rub-bish heap of rotting matter devours the dead without dis-

integrating them, disintegrates them without incinerating them, and incinerates them in everlasting death", worked like a peculiar self-feeding incinerator which simultaneously disintegrated and regenerated the rubbish which flowed from the rotten world, and paradoxically transformed the ephemeral into immortal, elevating the rejects and garbage into eternal, glorious trophies of divine justice. It was like a "rubbish heap filled with little worms" whose contents are continually regenerated and reintegrated in an incomprehensible cycle of sublimated destruction. (Camporesi, 55)

Pictures like this played in the minds of the masses for ages. Unlike our era, when many Christians shut hell from their minds, in previous days most people would have heard sermons illustrating the horrors of the realm of the damned.

Everything began to change in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, however. Some thinkers, following trends begun in the Renaissance, began to openly question the authority of the Bible, the existence of God, and the reality of heaven and hell. In Europe, especially in influential France, the number of "heretics" swelled as highly intelligent philosophers—called "philosophes"—launched attacks against the dogma of the Catholic Church. The Church, not used to having its teaching questioned so boldly in public, reacted strongly against the philosophes, which won the thinkers great approval from their peers. In time, through the power of the

printing press, the Enlightenment's ideas spread from country to country and city to city.

As history shows, the Enlightenment accomplished nothing less than a sea change in the West. Coupled with factors like rising health standards and increased social prosperity due to the rise of markets, many common folk began to wonder whether Christianity was worth all the moral trouble, with all of its constraints and denunciations, and whether heaven and hell might be little more than an invention of the church. Camporesi vividly describes this shift:

TOGETHER WITH THE GROWING infrequency of famine and the extinction of that other divine punishment, the plague, the European desire for life, which was reflected in the demographic increase and the rebirth of Christian hope in the form of a less absolute and tyrannical, less cruel and severe justice, laid the foundations, under the long influence of rationalism, for deism, pantheism, and for an anti-dogmatic historical criticism and skepticism; it even led to the dismantling of the dark city of punishment and to the gradual emptying—through the filter of a deliberate mental reform—of the life—prison of the damned. (Camporesi, 103–4)

The teaching of the Enlightenment philosophers caused many people to question beliefs long established as truth, even as changing living conditions allowed people to gradually liberate themselves from other-worldly teachings. Freshly emboldened,

many people distanced themselves from Christianity and its view of the afterlife in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the academy, which grew especially strong in the nineteenth century, higher criticism of the Bible caught on, and soon scholars were debunking whole books of the sacred text. It became fashionable among leading thinkers to disbelieve the Bible. Yet, this was by no means the only religious trend of this period; Christian revivals broke out frequently and Baptists and Methodists surged in popularity in this age. Even in Europe, stories of the demise of Christianity were in places greatly exaggerated. Yet a shift had taken place, one that altered the West for good.

We also need to look specifically at what has happened in America in the last 200 years to erode belief in the Christian afterlife. Theologian Al Mohler notes that in the nineteenth century in America, “Deists and Unitarians had rejected the idea of God as judge. In certain circles, higher criticism had undermined confidence in the Bible as divine revelation, and churchmen increasingly treated hell as a metaphor” (*Hell Under Fire*, 24–25). A new wing of Christianity rose to prominence in America in this time. Liberal Christianity explicitly retained certain elements of Christian teaching while rejecting others, including belief in an errorless Scripture, a wrathful God, a substitute sacrifice paying the blood penalty for sin, and hell. These views spread from New England—once the bastion of biblical Christianity in America—to various corners of the country, including many cities and centers of academic life.

The seed of doubt planted in the nineteenth century yielded a forest of skepticism in the twentieth. Mohler weighs in incisively:

THEOLOGICALLY, THE CENTURY that began in comfortable Victorian eloquence quickly became fertile ground for nihilism and *angst*. What World War I did not destroy, World War II took by assault and atrocity. The battlefields of Verdun and Ypres gave way to the ovens of Dachau and Auschwitz as symbols of the century.

At the same time, the technological revolutions of the century extended the worldview of scientific naturalism throughout much of the culture of the West, especially among elites. The result was a complete revolution in the place of religion in general, and Christianity in particular, in the public space. Ideological and symbolic secularization became the norm in Western societies with advanced technologies and ever-increasing levels of economic wealth. Both heaven and hell took on an essentially this-worldly character. (*Hell Under Fire*, 26)

The specter of secularism assaulted Christianity on numerous fronts, as the above makes clear. The great wars of the first part of the twentieth century swept away the tenuous Christian commitment of many Europeans and Americans. Weakened Christianity, Christianity without an omnipotent

and all-wise God, a glorious Savior laying His life down to save His people, and eternal life and death, proved no match for the “ovens of Dachau and Auschwitz.” Horror at the scope and spectacle of human suffering overwhelmed loosely held religious commitment.

With little connection to the rock-solid biblical foundation that nurtures the soul and buttresses the mind, modern man searched for a salve, a worldview that could give solace in the midst of mass destruction. His quest led him to various outlets. He found some relief in technology and the promise of scientific discovery. He nursed his spiritual wounds in the burgeoning psychological movement. He gave himself over to nihilism. He spent himself in hedonistic excess. In each of these outlets, he embraced a world-centered ideology and lost sight of the wonder of heaven and the horror of hell. Man, a spiritual creature bearing the imprint of eternity, morphed into a soulless being with no attachment to a concrete afterlife.

The Christian faith has suffered in the wake of these developments. Many Christian leaders have allowed the major cultural trends to shape the way they think about and live the Christian faith. Mohler suggests that in our day:

SIN HAS BEEN REDEFINED as a lack of self-esteem rather than as an insult to the glory of God. Salvation has been reconceived as liberation from oppression, internal or external. The gospel becomes a means of release from bondage to bad habits rather than rescue from a sentence of eternity in hell. (*Hell Under Fire*, 40)

Historian D. P. Walker concurs in his treatment of the modern view of hell:

ETERNAL TORMENT IS NOWADAYS an unpopular doctrine among most kinds of Christians; the God of love has nearly driven out the God of vengeance; vindictive justice has had to take refuge among the advocates of hanging; and it is no longer considered respectable to enjoy the infliction of even the justest punishment. (Walker, 262)

Philosopher A. J. Conyers points out that heaven is also out of vogue today:

WE LIVE IN A WORLD no longer under heaven. At least in most people's minds and imaginations that vision of reality has become little more than a caricature, conjuring up the saints and angels of baroque frescoes. And in the church only a hint remains of the power it once exercised in the hearts of believers. (Conyers, 11)

The Christian church is losing its grasp on heaven and hell. As is clear from this testimony, when set against our fast-paced, ever-changing, self-serving world, the afterlife—seemingly so vague and far off—struggles to hold our attention.

## What Moderns Believe about the Afterlife

Many who do believe in Christianity have modernized it. We have made our faith about fulfillment and achievement, sentimentalized love, and earthly progress. We have adopted the consumerist mind-set endemic to the West and have substituted the pursuit of plenty for the pursuit of piety. David Wells suggests:

THIS EXPERIENCE OF ABUNDANCE which is the result of both extraordinary ingenuity and untamed desire is a tell-tale sign that we have moved from a traditional society to one that is modern, from a time when God and the supernatural were “natural” parts of life, to one in which God is now alienated and dislocated from our modernized world. In traditional societies, what one could legitimately have wanted was limited. It was, of course, limited because people lived with only a few choices and little knowledge of life other than the life they lived; their vision of life had not been invaded, as ours is, by pictures of beguiling Caribbean shorelines, sleek luxury under the Lexus insignia, time-shares in fabulous places, or exotic perfumes sure to stir hidden passions. (Wells, 42)

Wells’s analysis brings us back to where we started: preference. We modern folk live with a mind-boggling array of

choices that our ancestors never knew. The family's in Dallas, but do we prefer the weather in Denver? Our parents ran a drug store, but would we prefer dentistry? Should we have kids now, or delay five or six years? Would we like to reinvent our bodies? If so, what would we like to change—a new nose? Different eyelids? Fuller, thicker lips? In these and countless other ways—many of them neutral, a good number of them acceptable, and some of them downright harmful—we encounter the category of choice, never realizing how differently we act and think from our forebears.

When it comes to choices about the afterlife, Americans exercise their “right” with aplomb. A recent Barna poll probing belief in heaven and hell discovered the following results:

IN ALL, 76% BELIEVE that Heaven exists, while nearly the same proportion said that there is such a thing as Hell (71%). Respondents were given various descriptions of Heaven and asked to choose the statement that best fits their belief about Heaven. Those who believe in Heaven were divided between describing Heaven as “a state of eternal existence in God’s presence” (46%) and those who said it is “an actual place of rest and reward where souls go after death” (50%). Other Americans claimed that Heaven is just “symbolic” (14%), that there is no such thing as life after death (5%), or that they are not sure (5%).

While there is no dominant view of Hell, two particular perspectives are popular. Four out of ten adults believe that Hell is “a state of eternal separation from God’s presence” (59%) and one-third (32%) says it is “an actual place of torment and suffering where people’s souls go after death.” A third perspective that one in eight adults believe is that “Hell is just a symbol of an unknown bad outcome after death” (13%). Other respondents were “not sure” or said they that they do not believe in an afterlife (16%). (Barna)

These numbers reflecting belief in the afterlife may seem high given the foregoing commentary, and it is surely true that some form of belief in heaven and hell does persist today. Yet one cannot help but note the uncertainty when respondents attempted to define their views of hell. This is, after all, where the rubber meets the eschatological road. Many will profess to believe in Christian doctrine, but we must look closely at how they define this doctrine to grasp the strength of their belief. At the end of the day, far fewer people than one might think claim belief in heaven and hell as the Bible defines these realms. In addition, we might also note that one cannot separate heaven and hell, as so many seem to think. The Scripture does not give us the option of choosing which realm we want to believe in.

## How a Loss of Biblical Belief in the Afterlife Has Affected the Church

The shifts in cultural thinking about the afterlife have transformed the way many Christians preach. Many pastors wish to reach people for Jesus, but they know that many folks have little patience with heady doctrine or biblical instruction. They choose to preach on more practical matters, areas that most people can readily understand. This kind of approach is understandable, but it has the unfortunate effect of silencing what past Christians have called the “whole counsel” of God, meaning the full sweep of biblical theology. In this kind of environment, preaching can become little more than an advice session or what others have called “group therapy.”

Many pastors resist these trends. But where they do not, the people in the pew have little stimulus to think about the afterlife and things of eternal consequence. We are left instead to think much about things of this world. Thus, many of us think little about heaven and a good deal about football, renovating our houses, shopping, or gossip. We rarely talk about hell but often about television and movies. We joke about being “heavenly minded” and shy away from Christians who seem to be, viewing them as odd and out-of-place (indeed, they are). We strive to be cool, hip, fashionable, relevant, and plugged in, unaware of how little these things will matter in eternity. Our mind-set, unbeknownst to us, is almost entirely rooted in this world. We have little connection with the life to

come, which the Scripture teaches has already begun in us and in our churches (Mark 1:15).

Many of us sense this sad situation and want it to change. We do not want to be so busy, and we do not like what certain aspects of our modern way of life have done to our devotions, our daily thoughts, and our time at church. Many of us want to be more focused on heaven and more faithful in leading people away from hell through gospel proclamation. The problem, though, is that our modern lifestyle has trained us only to think deeply and searchingly about things like heaven and hell when our more pressing concerns have ceased—which is a rare occurrence.

### **An Edwardsean Solution to Our Modern Dilemma**

Though the task seems impossible, we have guides who have gone before us and who can help us to recover an eschatological perspective. One of them is the colonial pastor Jonathan Edwards, who devoted tremendous amounts of time and energy to thinking and teaching on heaven and hell. In chapters to come, we will look at Edwards's specific views, seeing how very real heaven and hell actually are, and finding our hearts stirred by the biblical material that Edwards powerfully exposit.

Having laid out the loss of our cultural connection with the afterlife, we're going to start our study with a look at how the afterlife was viewed in Edwards's own cultural context, as

well as examine what Edwards said about the general subject of the afterlife and how he sought to cultivate a mind-set in his people that bound their lives to the age to come. We will look briefly at a number of different writings from the pastor that show just how concerned he was with the afterlife—and demonstrate how great our own interest must be.

### Edwards's Cultural Context

In Edwards's eighteenth-century era, the afterlife dominated the thinking of many people, including parents, who sought to ready their children for their eternal destiny. Historian George Marsden describes how many parents prepared their children for death in his magisterial volume *Jonathan Edwards*:

MUCH OF PURITAN UPBRINGING was designed to teach children to recognize how insecure their lives were. Every child knew of brothers, sisters, cousins, or friends who had suddenly died. Cotton Mather . . . eventually lost thirteen of his fifteen children. Parents nightly reminded their children that sleep was a type of death and taught them such prayers as "This day is past; but tell me who can say / That I shall surely live another day." . . . One of the Edwards children's surviving writing exercises reads, "Nothing is more certain than death. Take no delay in the great work of preparing for death." (Marsden, 26–7)

Popular literature of the day underscored this perspective. Historian Charles Hambrick-Stowe comments on a wildly successful author, Michael Wigglesworth, who wrote a popular book called *The Day of Doom*:

WIGGLESWORTH EXHORTED thousands of New Englanders to prepare for death in *The Day of Doom* and his other poems. His prefatory lines explicitly stated that the epic's purpose was "That Death and Judgment may not come / And find thee unprepared." His overriding method in *The Day of Doom* was to instill the fear of Christ as terrible Judge and drive penitents to Him for mercy in this life before it was too late. Terror was a means of grace, but the hoped for end was escape from terror. "Oh get a part in Christ," Wigglesworth cried, "And make the Judge thy Friend." (Hambrick-Stowe, 239-40)

Such a text would struggle to find even a Christian publisher today, but colonial New England prized literature of a different kind, as Hambrick-Stowe's reports of sales records show: "*The Day of Doom* was the most popular piece of literature in seventeenth-century New England. An unprecedented eight-hundred copies were printed in the first edition in 1662, which sold out in the first year. Thereafter the work was reissued repeatedly" (Hambrick-Stowe, 240).

We might wonder what cultural impulse accounted for these hefty sales figures. Colonial citizens of the seventeenth

and eighteenth centuries knew a world much different from ours. They had no hospitals. They possessed precious few working remedies for illness. They knew very little about the causes of sickness—germ theory, for example, did not emerge until the mid-nineteenth century. Pregnancy and labor were potentially fearful undertakings: scholars have estimated that one in six children died in colonial America, meaning that most families would mourn the loss of at least one or two children in their lifetime (Marten, 80). Attacks from Native Americans posed a constant threat in many places. American colonists did not study death out of a perverse fascination, but practical necessity. Where we try to cheat death, they prepared themselves to meet death.

### Edwards's Focus on the Afterlife

As was common for a minister of his time, Edwards often confronted death in his preaching. For example, in his sermon "The Importance of a Future State," he discoursed plainly about death, reminding his people of its certain visitation:

BUT ALL OTHER MEN must die in the ordinary way of separation of their souls from their bodies. Men of all ranks, degrees, and orders must die: strong [and] weak; kings, princes [and] beggars; rich [and] poor; good [and] bad. (*Works* 10, 356–7)

Edwards outlined how God had planted eternity in the heart of all people, leaving us with the knowledge in our conscience that this life is not the end of things. He wrote:

NOW GOD HAS IMPLANTED in us this natural disposition of expecting a reward or punishment, according as we do well or ill, for this disposition is natural to us: 'tis in our very nature; God had made it with us. And to what purpose should God make in us a disposition to expect rewards and punishments if there are none? (*Works* 10, 357)

Edwards had a plainspoken approach to death and the life beyond. Death, for him, was a fundamental consequence of existence. All people must face it. Accordingly, Edwards sought to prepare his people for the end.

In another sermon, “Death and Judgment,” preached to his Native American congregation in Stockbridge, the pastor walked his listeners through the essential matters of life and death:

IN THIS WORLD, sometimes, wicked men are great kings, and deal very hardly and cruelly with good men, and put 'em to death; and therefore, there must be another world where good men shall all be happy and wicked men miserable. . . .

In another world, God will call 'em to an account [of] what they have done here in this world: how they have

improved their time, and whe[ther] they have kept his commandments or no.

He will [hold] them to an account that have heard the gospel preached; [he will ask] whether or no they have repented of their sins and have in their hearts accepted of Jesus Christ as their Savior.

And then all wicked men, and they that would not repent of their sins and come [to] Christ, will have their mouths stopped and will have nothing to say. (*Works* 25, 594-95)

The pastor's straightforward approach to the afterlife allowed him to reach his Native American audience in clear, understandable language. Sermons like this one revealed how the decisions and habits of this life had far-reaching consequences for the next. In the afterlife God would balance the scales of justice.

The pastor's sermons on the afterlife took many forms, some plain, others soaring in their sweep. In his "Farewell Sermon" to his Northampton congregation, Edwards painted a hair-raising picture of the last day that surely grabbed the attention of his hearers:

ALTHOUGH THE WHOLE WORLD will be then present, all mankind of all generations gathered in one vast assembly, with all of the angelic nature, both elect and fallen angels; yet we need not suppose, that everyone will have a distinct

and particular knowledge of each individual of the whole assembled multitude, which will undoubtedly consist of many millions of millions. Though 'tis probable that men's capacities will be much greater than in their present state, yet they will not be infinite: though their understanding and comprehension will be vastly extended, yet men will not be deified. There will probably be a very enlarged view, that particular persons will have of the various parts and members of that vast assembly. . . . There will be special reason, why those who have had special concerns together in this world, in their state of probation, and whose mutual affairs will be then to be tried and judged, should especially be set in one another's view.

The last day would mark the end of man's ability to repent. When all people appeared before the great judgment seat of God, none could change their stripes, a fact that Edwards brought out in chilling detail:

BUT WHEN THEY SHALL MEET together at the day of judgment . . . they will all meet in an unchangeable state. Sinners will be in an unchangeable state: they who then shall be under the guilt and power of sin, and have the wrath of God abiding on them, shall be beyond all remedy or possibility of change, and shall meet their ministers without any hopes of relief or remedy, or getting any good by their

means. And as for the saints, they will be already perfectly delivered from all their before-remaining corruption, temptation and calamities of every kind, and set forever out of their reach; and no deliverance, no happy alteration will remain to be accomplished in the way of the use of means of grace, under the administration of ministers. It will then be pronounced, "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still; and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still; and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still; and he that is holy, let him be holy still" [Revelation 22:11]. (*Works* 25, 466)

With his exegetical insight and vivid imagination, Edwards transported his hearers to the holy ground he described. Behind his foreboding sketch of the day of judgment was a pressing concern that his people prepare themselves for it. Edwards closed his sermon with a hopeful but sober call to seek the Lord while He could be found as a Savior and not a Judge:

DEAR CHILDREN, I leave you in an evil world, that is full of snares and temptations. God only knows what will become of you. This the Scripture has told us, that there are but few saved: and we have abundant confirmation of it from what we see. This we see, that children die as well as others: multitudes die before they grow up; and of those that grow up, comparatively few ever give good evidence

of saving conversion to God. I pray God to pity you, and take care of you, and provide for you the best means for the good of your souls; and that God himself would undertake for you, to be your heavenly Father, and the mighty Redeemer of your immortal souls. (*Works* 25, 484–5)

The pastor's final words to the Northampton congregation did not resolve the bitter conflict between Edwards and his detractors. They did, however, direct the church members to recognize the fragility of life and to throw themselves on the mercy of Christ.

Edwards did not only preach this message to his congregation. He spoke of it constantly to his children. To live in the Edwards household was to come into regular contact with the reality of death and the necessity of gospel preparation for the afterlife. The following letter to Edwards's daughter Esther, dated May 27, 1755, shows both the tenderness and seriousness of the father on these matters. It is worth quoting at length:

DEAR CHILD,

Though you are a great way off from us, yet you are not out of our minds: I am full of concern for you, often think of you, and often pray for you. Though you are at so great a distance from us, and from all your relations, yet this is a comfort to us, that the same God that is here, is also at Onohquaga; and that though you are out of our sight and out of our reach, you are always in God's hands, who is

infinitely gracious; and we can go to him, and commit you to his care and mercy. Take heed that you don't forget or neglect him. Always set God before your eyes, and live in his fear, and seek him every day with all diligence: for 'tis he, and he only can make you happy or miserable, as he pleases; and your life and health, and the eternal salvation of your soul, and your all in this life and that which is to come, depends on his will and pleasure.

The week before last, on Thursday, David died; whom you knew and used to play with, and who used to live at our house. His soul is gone into the eternal world. Whether he was prepared for death, we don't know. This is a loud call of God to you to prepare for death. You see that they that are young die, as well as those that are old: David was not very much older than you. Remember what Christ has said, that you must be born again, or you never can see the kingdom of God. Never give yourself any rest, unless you have good evidence that you are converted and become a new creature. We hope that God will preserve your life and health, and return you to Stockbridge again in safety; but always remember that life is uncertain: you know not how soon you must die, and therefore had need to be always ready.

We have very lately heard from your brothers and sisters at Northampton and at Newark, that they are well. Your aged grandfather and grandmother, when I was at Windsor, gave their love to you. We here all do the same.

I am,  
Your tender and affectionate father,  
Jonathan Edwards.  
(*Works* 16, 666–67)

The letter makes clear both that Jonathan took eternity very seriously and that he loved his daughter Esther. He expressed that he was “full of concern” for her, and his tone is affectionate throughout. But sentimentality did not overwhelm theology for Edwards. Love at its height involved concern for the soul and ultimate things. Edwards thus went to great lengths to impress upon his little girl that she needed to “always set God before” her if she was to transcend this life and rest eternally with Him in heaven. Surely, she had received many letters and admonitions just like this one. In his fathering, as in his preaching, Edwards communicated that death was close—but so was the God of mercy.

### Rediscovering the Afterlife

In our age, the worldviews of too many Christians resemble the nineteenth-century system of belief so eloquently decried in the poem by Emily Dickinson quoted in the intro-

duction. In our day, many of us busy ourselves with this world and the perfection of our existence in it. We have little fire for an otherworldly lifestyle, because we have little connection to the other world. It is generally taken for granted, rarely meditated on, rarely spoken of. The temporality of this life, the fragility of it, is forgotten.

Hope does exist for a recovery of vigorous spiritual belief and practice. In the work and example of Edwards and many other eternity-minded Christians from the past, we find the perspective we need. Edwards lived and worked as if heaven and hell were real, because he knew that they were. Our contact with Edwards's vivid, biblically saturated descriptions of the day of judgment and the age to come chart the way forward. We need to let the biblical testimony on the afterlife seep into our consciences and steep for a while so that we may pursue a new way of thinking and living.

In a world stricken with a plague of narcissism and distractedness, it is essential that we recognize the truth about the afterlife now, while we may ready ourselves for the end. Death and the final judgment swiftly approach us all. In these last days, our only hope is to prepare ourselves for the end by seeking the one who holds eternity in His mighty hand.



## *Preparing for Eternity*

### *Know How the World Is Shaping Your Thoughts*

**I**n an age when many ignore or disdain the Bible's teaching on eternity, the challenge for Christians is to both believe the truth about eternity and then to live in light of it. We may accomplish the first by studying scriptural books like the Minor Prophets, which have much to say about the judgment and the afterlife, the Pauline epistles (1 and 2 Thessalonians, for example), and the book of Revelation. As we study these works with a commentary at hand to help us puzzle through the hard parts, we can also immerse ourselves in strong theology. As one can readily tell, the work of Jonathan Edwards is a great place to start. The Puritans of post-Reformation era England and America focused a great deal on the afterlife (the Puritan paperbacks from Banner of Truth books have much helpful material on this subject). This kind of self-education will help us to refute unsound thinking even as it expands our own worldview and stokes our imagination to contemplate the life to come.

This last point is worth pondering. Though we need to steer clear of emotional speculation, it will do us great good to think about heaven by using our imaginations in accordance with the Bible. The Scripture is a visionary book, one that

engages our minds, fires our thoughts, and rouses us to action. It is not a tame book. It will swallow us whole, transforming our understanding of this world and the next. If we do not let the biblical testimony on heaven and hell play in our minds, it will surely rest lightly on our hearts, causing us to lose sight of the monumental vision the Lord gave us of the age to come.

### *Know How the World Is Shaping Your Deeds*

Once we have begun this theological work, we will find that our spiritual lives change. We will be able to identify where Satan and this world have tricked us into living as if this realm matters more than eternity. We will surely see that we have disobeyed the teaching of 1 John 2:15 (a great verse on which to meditate) and have loved the things of this world too much. Our specific sins on this point will vary, but many of us will see that instead of living according to biblically determined priorities, we have in many ways mimicked our secular counterparts and loved possessions and this-worldly experiences more than we should have.

This mindset shows at numerous points in our lives. It has affected our parenting, causing us, at times, to postpone family devotions and close shepherding for another day. Many of us struggle to keep work in proper balance. We are tempted to sacrifice valuable time with our families, friends, and fellow church members for the sake of a few corruptible possessions. Everywhere around us are people with eternal souls, and yet many of us have difficulty beginning evangelistic friendships.

We support missionaries in principle, but sometimes we give more support to the local mall or golf club than to the work of the gospel.

In these and many other ways, the world is causing us to prioritize it and not God. The gospel is meant to usher in an eschatological life, a life lived with heaven and hell in full view. This life will naturally include many of the good things common to this world, but it has a fundamentally different orientation and frame of reference than the unbelieving life, which is by definition this-worldly. Our challenge, then, is plain—we need to take heaven and hell seriously. We need to glorify God by prioritizing eternity. We need to show the world by the way we live that heaven and hell are real. Belief in the afterlife is not, as so many think, a matter of preference. It is a necessity with eternal consequences. This point will only make sense to unbelievers around us when we Christians, those who have been claimed for all eternity, live with the reality of eternity ever before us.