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*JONATHAN
EDWARDS
LOVER OF GOD*

THE ESSENTIAL
EDWARDS
COLLECTION

OWEN STRACHAN *and* DOUGLAS SWEENEY

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

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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.

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CHAPTER 1



The Beauty of God



What is the starting point of Christian faith? When you wake up and begin your morning study of the Bible, what are you seeking to find out? Or, to go back in time a bit, why did you begin to study the Bible in the first place?

The starting point of religion or spirituality for many today is the individual and his or her subjective feelings. What do I want? What do I need, in a spiritual sense? How can religion, and whatever superpower lies behind it, serve me and meet my desires? In short, what can I get from this deal? Sadly, even Christians are not immune to these questions.

Though biblical spirituality certainly addresses and responds to the heart-cries of lost sinners, its starting point is nothing

other than the living God. From the awe-inspiring opening of Genesis 1:1—"In the beginning God"—to the cataclysmic ending of Revelation 21:22—"in the city . . . is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb"—the Bible declares without interruption or apology that God is the starting and ending points of true religion. As portrayed in the Bible, God does not bow to man. Man, lost and helpless, bows to God.

The great New England pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards seized upon this central truth early in his life. When he was a young, budding scholar at Yale University, he suddenly discovered in his daily meditation on the Scripture "a sense of the glory of the divine being" that transformed his life (*Works* 16, 492). Reflecting later on this chrysalis moment, Edwards preached that with genuine faith "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). When a sinner comes to understand the graciousness of God, and the majesty of His character, they see with piercing clarity that "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" (*Works* 17, 413). In this chapter, we examine the center of Edwards's theology, the Lord God, who formed the first link in a cycle of beauty that begins with creation and runs its course to heaven.

The Starting Point of Theology

When the young Yale tutor pushed past the muddle of everyday life and became aware of God's ineffable character, it was as if scales fell from his eyes. The theater, the cosmic drama, of God's reign over the world came into view, and Jonathan stood transfixed. He saw heaven and hell, man and Satan, in clearer view than ever before. But above all, Jonathan saw the Lord. He knew then that God was no abstract deity, but was a personal being whom all creation could not contain. In his sermon "God's Excellencies," preached in 1720, the same year of his spiritual breakthrough, Jonathan considered the qualities of God that robed Him in splendor. He prefaced his analysis with a warning of his unworthiness for the task:

WHAT POOR, MISERABLE CREATURES, then, are we, to talk of the infinite and transcendent gloriousness of the great, eternal, and almighty Jehovah; what miserable work do worms of the dust make, when they get upon such a theme as this, which the very angels do stammer at? But yet, although we are but worms and insects, less than insects, nothing at all, yea, less than nothing, yet so has God dignified us, that he has made [us] for this very end: to think and be astonished [at] his glorious perfections. And this is what we hope will be our business to all eternity; to think on, to delight [in], to speak of, and sing forth, the infinite

excellencies of the Deity. He has made us capable of understanding so much of him here as is necessary in order to our acceptable worshipping and praising him, and he has instructed us, and taught us, as little ignorant babes and infants, and has helped our weak understanding by his instructions; he has told us what he is, has condescended to our poor capacities and described himself to us after the manner of men: as men, when they teach children, must teach them after their manner of thinking of things, and come down to their childish capacities, so has God taught us concerning himself. (*Works* 10, 417–18)

The one who spoke of God, in Edwards's mind, did so as a created, lowly being, a "worm of the dust." This is a striking beginning for the study of God. One did not discuss the Lord as an abstract concept. One begins the study of theology lying in the dust beside the prophet Ezekiel, heart pounding, eyes straining to shut out the piercing glory of God (Ezekiel 1:28–2:10).

Beginning his study of God with the Word of God, Edwards, like Ezekiel, raised himself from the ground and began to speak of what he saw. God's beauty had numerous facets and required all man's senses to comprehend it. Edwards identified seven attributes that demonstrated God's excellency, or beauty. Edwards's descriptions of these are worth quoting at length. One should ponder them slowly and meditatively, for they provide rich food for one's spiritual nourishment.

Eternality and Self-Existence

The first of these was longevity and independence of existence. Edwards strove to wrap his mind around the reality that God had always existed. He wrote:

[I]T IS NECESSARY THAT that which hath a beginning must have some cause, some author that gave it a beginning, but God never had a beginning; there was none before him, and therefore none that gave him his being. He thanks no one for his being; doth not, nor ever did depend upon any for it, but receives his being from himself, and depends alone on himself. Neither doth he thank anyone for anything he enjoys: his power, his wisdom, his excellency, his glory, his honor, and [his] authority are his own, and received from none other; he possesses them and he will possess them: he is powerful and he will be powerful; he is glorious and he will be glorious; he is infinitely honorable, but he receives his honor from himself; he is infinitely happy and he will be infinitely happy; he reigns and rules over the whole universe, and he will rule and do what he pleases, in the armies of heaven and amongst the inhabitants of the earth. Poor nothing creatures can do nothing towards controlling of [Him]; they, with all their power conjoined, which is but weakness, can't deprive Jehovah of any

of these things. He was just the same, in all respects, from all eternity as he is now; as he was, infinite ages before the foundations of the world were laid, so he is now and so he will be, with exactly the same glory and happiness uninterrupted, immovable and unchangeable, the same yesterday, today, and forever. (*Works* 10, 419)

As Edwards saw Him, God dwelt in a realm of glory untouched by time and age, dependent on nothing for His timeless existence. Theologians use the term aseity to describe the utter independence and power of God. God “thanks no one for his being,” as Edwards put it. His existence is underived. He is altogether powerful, needing no one, never aging, never changing, never growing weary. From the beginning of time until the end of the universe, God exists.

One of the central ironies of the Christian life is that the more we come to learn about God, the more awesome He appears. No matter how high-powered one’s mind may be, He is the “immovable and unchangeable” one, a timeless figure from a realm outside our own. Finite creatures simply cannot comprehend His duration of existence, hard as we try. The more we understand, the more we realize how little we truly know.

Greatness

God’s greatness, or exalted status, stands beside His length of existence as a second element of His excellency. Over every living thing, Edwards preached, stands God:

GOD IS INFINITELY EXALTED above all created beings in greatness. This earth appears to us as a very great thing. When we think of the large countries and continents, the vast oceans, and the great distance between one country and another, the whole, together, appears very great and vast; but especially doth the great universe surprise us with its greatness, to which, without doubt, this vast earth, as we call it, is less than any mote or dust, that ever we saw, is to the whole earth; but how shall we be surprised when we think that all this vast creation, making the most of it we can, is infinitely less, when compared with the greatness of God, than the least discernible atom is to the whole creation! (*Works* 10, 419)

Over all the heights of the universe stands the Lord God. There is no point of comparison between God and all else, wrote Edwards; He “is infinitely exalted above all.” God has no end, and one cannot map out His coordinates. He is vast and mysterious, greater than the greatest things we can imagine. His scope speaks to His majestic beauty.

Loveliness

The third attribute that shows God’s beauty is His loveliness or splendor. Edwards used picturesque images to describe God’s bountiful loveliness:

THE BEAUTY OF TREES, plants, and flowers, with which God has bespangled the face of the earth, is delightful; the beautiful frame of the body of man, especially in its perfection, is astonishing; the beauty of the moon and stars is wonderful; the beauty of [the] highest heavens is transcendent; the excellency of angels and the saints in light is very glorious: but it is all deformity and darkness in comparison of the brighter glories and beauties of the Creator of all, for “behold even to the moon, and it shineth not” (Job 25:5); that is, think of the excellency of God and the moon will not seem to shine to you, God’s excellency so much outshines [it]. And the stars are not pure in his sight, and so we know that at the great day when God appears, the sun shall be turned into darkness, shall hide his face as if he were ashamed to see himself so much outshined; and the very angels, they hide their faces before him; the highest heavens are not clean in his sight, and he charges his angels with folly. (*Works* 10, 421)

While a pastor in Northampton, Massachusetts (1726–1750), Edwards loved to take long walks or ride his horse through the stunning New England countryside. Though he relished the outdoors, he knew that the beauty of the earth was nothing but a passing shadow compared to the beauty of God. The shining stars and the brisk Northampton nights, though grand, were still “not pure in his sight.” Even the very realm of the

Lord, “the highest heavens,” pale in comparison to Him. God’s beauty is perfect, and all appears unclean in comparison.

Power

The fourth attribute that displayed the beauty of God was His power. Over the most powerful people of the earth, God reigned as King:

WHEN HE PLEASES, one king must die, and who he pleases must reign in his room; armies conquer or are conquered according as he will have it: “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, and he turns them as the rivers of water” [Proverbs 21:1]. Thus he holds an absolute and uncontrollable government in the world; and thus he has done from the beginning, and thus he will do to the end of all things. Neither is his dominion confined to the children of men, but he rules the whole creation. He gives commands to the seas, and has appointed them bounds which they cannot pass; “which removeth the mountains, and they know it not who overturneth them in his anger; which shaketh the earth out of its place, and the pillars thereof tremble; who commandeth the sun and it riseth not; who seaeth up the stars, which maketh Arcturus and Orion, and the chambers of the south; who doth great things past finding out; yea, wonders without number” [Job 9:5–7, Job 9:9–10]. (*Works* 10, 422)

Edwards summarized this material by noting:

WHAT A VAST and uncontrollable dominion hath the almighty God. The kings of the earth are not worthy of the name, for they are not able to execute their authority in their narrow bounds, except by the power and assistance of their subjects, but God rules most absolutely the whole universe by himself; kings rule, perhaps sometimes for forty years, but God's kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and of his dominion there is no end. Well, therefore, may he be said to be the blessed and only potentate, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. (*Works* 10, 422)

Over against the self-importance of earthly rulers, Edwards asserted the sovereignty of the God of the Bible. Kings thought that they governed with unchallenged authority, but Edwards's God "rules the whole creation," "gives commands to the seas," and oversees "most absolutely the whole universe by himself" while He advances His "everlasting kingdom." The Lord controls the hearts of men but is Himself "uncontrollable." The power of this God is itself a work of beauty, an aesthetic performance. In the hurricane's squall, the shuddering of the earth, the eruption of a volcano, we glimpse the force that formed this world and rules over it until the end of the age.

Wisdom

The fifth element of God's excellence and beauty is His wisdom. Edwards turned again to the best of human beings to compare them to God:

THE WISEST OF MEN, how little do they know, how frequently are they deceived and frustrated, and their wisdom turned to foolishness, their politic designs undermined; but when was the time that God's wisdom failed, that he did not obtain his end, although all the bleak army of hell are continually endeavoring to counterwork him? When was it that God altered his mind and purpose, or took a wrong step in the government of the world? (*Works* 10, 423)

Edwards revealed that God's purposes are not frustrated. What He plans according to His stores of wisdom, He does. The earth and all who live in it take their cues from Him. He is quite unlike even "the wisest of men," who cannot help but see "their wisdom turned to foolishness" and their "politic designs undermined." God may face resistance to His plans, but only for so long as He tolerates it. No man can stand before Him, and no one can resist His will (Romans 9:19).

Edwards believed strongly in the infallibility of God, His inability to make an error or mistake of any kind. God's infinite knowledge undergirded this trait:

SOLOMON WAS SENSIBLE that there was need of uncommon and extraordinary wisdom to rule such a kingdom as he had; but what wisdom, what vast knowledge and infinite penetration must he have, who has every being in the world to rule and govern; who rules every thought, and every purpose, every motion and action, not only of angels and men, but of every creature, great and small, even to every little atom in the whole creation, and that forever and ever? What infinite wisdom and knowledge is necessary and requisite in order to this! But this God doth; this he hath done and will do. All the changes and alterations that happen in all the world, heaven and earth, whether great or never so small, he knows it altogether, even to the least insect that crawls upon the earth, or dust that flies in the air; and it is all from his disposal, and according to his eternal determination. (*Works* 10, 423)

Edwards compared the Lord to Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived. Solomon, Edwards noted, used his intelligence and discernment “to rule such a kingdom as he had,” but God “rules every thought, and every purpose, every motion and action” of all that will ever live and breathe on the earth. To reign wisely, Solomon collected whatever knowledge he could; God, however, possesses all the knowledge of the world without sending so much as a solitary angel from heaven to report back. In Edwards’s simple phrase, “He knows it altogether.”

The knowledge of God extends over and into all things. The Lord is by definition not a limited, finite being like a human. He knows all and exercises complete control over all. If it were not so, Edwards's words indicate, He would not be God.

God's Beauty: Holiness

The sixth quality of God that rendered Him beautiful in the mind of the Massachusetts theologian was His holiness. "Now God is infinitely holy," Edwards declared:

AND INFINITELY EXALTED THEREIN, above the holy angels and all creatures; there is not the least tincture of defilement or pollution in the Deity, but he is infinitely far from it: he is all pure light, without mixture of darkness; he hates and abhors sin above all things, 'tis what is directly contrary to his nature. This, his great holiness, has he made known to us by his justice, truth, and faithfulness in all his dispensations towards us, and by the pure holiness of his laws and commands.

Holiness used to be for a distinguishing attribute between the God of Israel and other gods, Daniel 4:8, "But at last Daniel came in before me, whose name is Belteshazzar, according to the name of my God, and in whom is the spirit of the holy gods"; and so in the next verse, "because I know the holy gods is in thee." Likewise, in the

eighteenth verse, "the Holy One" is a name that God seems to delight [in]. 'Tis that attribute which continually ravishes the seraphims, and causes them continually to cry in their praises, without ceasing, "holy, holy, holy." This is the sound with which the highest heaven, the palace of God, perpetually rings, and [it] will ring on earth in the glorious times that are hastening. (*Works* 10, 423–4)

Above the greatest, purest beings one could conceive, the Lord shone in the mind of Edwards and the world beyond "in the splendor of his holiness" (Psalm 96:9). Using one of his favorite metaphors, Edwards preached that the Lord "is all pure light, without mixture of darkness." As with so much of Edwards's discussion of the Lord's attributes, moral and ethical description mingles with aesthetic and physical description. The Lord's appearance relates directly to His works even as His works relate directly to His appearance. He does that which is of the light, and He Himself is the light. His character, like His person, radiates. His holiness is the spark that illuminates the heavens and the earth.

Goodness

The seventh and final attribute described by Edwards as a part of God's overarching excellence was His goodness. This attribute consisted primarily of a blend of kindness and justice that God frequently manifested to the world:

GOD IS INFINITELY EXALTED above all created beings in goodness. Goodness and royal bounty, mercy, and clemency is the glory of earthly monarchs and princes, but in this is the Lord, our God, infinitely exalted above them. God delights in the welfare and prosperity of his creatures; he delights in making of them exceeding happy and blessed, if they will but accept of the happiness which he offers.

All creatures do continually live upon the bounty of God; he maintains the whole creation of his mere goodness: every good thing that is enjoyed is a part of his bounty. When kings are bountiful, and dispense good things to their subjects, they do but give that which the Almighty before gave to them. So merciful and so full of pity is God, that when miserable man, whom He had no need of, who did Him no good, nor could be of any advantage to Him, had made himself miserable by his rebellion against God, He took such pity on him that He sent His only Son to undergo his torment for him, that he might be delivered and set free. And now He offers freely, to bestow upon those rebels, complete and perfect happiness to all eternity upon this, His Son's account. There never was such an instance of goodness, mercy, pity, and compassion since the world began; all the mercy and goodness amongst creatures fall infinitely short of it: this is goodness that never was, never will, never can be paralleled by any other beings. (*Works* 10, 424)

Edwards compared the potent goodness of God with the goodness of the most powerful earthly figure, the king. His comparison showed how much greater God was than even the most majestic emperor. The king could show “bounty, “mercy,” and “clemency,” but all his goodness paled before the supernatural kindness of the Lord.

In Edwards’s conception, God’s goodness meant that “he delights in making” His people “exceeding happy and blessed.” The highest expression of this goodness was the crucifixion of the Son of God. In the death of Jesus Christ, God showed His kindness and love to sinners on a scale only infinity could contain. “There never was such an instance of goodness, mercy, pity, and compassion,” Edwards asserted, for “this is goodness that never was, never will, never can be paralleled by any other beings.” No one else could qualify to take on the sins of mankind, bear the wrath of God, and cleanse the guilty but the Son of God. One could spot God’s goodness in countless forms throughout the world—whether in His general care for mankind or His special care for His people—but nowhere in greater measure than in the death of Jesus Christ.

The beauty of God was, in the eyes of Edwards, a multifaceted diamond, a precious collection of attributes in their purest form: self-existence, greatness, loveliness, power, wisdom, holiness, and goodness. Over all the earth and all the created order stood this Lord, beautiful for the perfections of His person. Edwards discovered these perfections in Scripture and thus began his spiritual life and theological thought from a God-centered starting point.

Making God's Beauty Known

Because of His majesty, unfolded in the seven attributes examined above, the Lord properly delighted in Himself and the mere presence of His own beauty. Before one discussed creation, or Christ's incarnation, or the church, or heaven, one had to realize that God's self-sufficiency, His perfect fullness and majesty, rendered Him the only figure in existence who could justly glory in and be satisfied by Himself. Edwards articulated this foundational point in his 1749 work *Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, where he argued that:

GOD'S LOVE TO HIMSELF, and his own attributes, will therefore make him delight in that which is the use, end and operation of these attributes. If one highly esteem and delight in the virtues of a friend, as wisdom, justice, etc., that have relation to action, this will make him delight in the exercise and genuine effects of these virtues: so if God both esteem and delight in his own perfections and virtues, he can't but value and delight in the expressions and genuine effects of them. So that in delighting in the expressions of his perfections, he manifests a delight in his own perfections themselves: or in other words, he manifests a delight in himself; and in making these expressions of his own perfections his end, *he makes himself his end.* (Works 8, 437)

Edwards elaborated on this point, developing the idea that God's focal point in His existence was the enjoyment of His own glory:

THE MORAL RECTITUDE of God's heart must consist in a proper and due respect of his heart to things that are objects of moral respect: that is, to intelligent beings capable of moral actions and relations. And therefore it must chiefly consist in giving due respect to that Being to whom most is due; yea, infinitely most, and in effect all. For God is infinitely and most worthy of regard. (*Works* 8, 421–22)

The essence of this section is that God's majestic nature not only enables but calls Him to glory in Himself. As a perfect being, a figure of absolute eternality, greatness, loveliness, power, wisdom, holiness, and goodness, God deserved to celebrate and glorify Himself. This assertion of Edwards intensifies one's understanding of the beauty and worth of God. Because of His excellent nature, God is wholly justified in seeking glory and honor and praise and worship for Himself. This is the foundation for Edwards's entire theological system, and it shapes his view of creation, Christ, the church, and heaven, as subsequent chapters will show.

Edwards's treatment of the traits of God offers a framework by which to comprehend and approach the Lord. God alone is self-sufficient and worthy of worship. Writing three hundred years ago, Edwards illuminated this fundamental

reality of Scripture and showed that God, possessing beauty beyond human comprehension, is the only being deserving of worship. We began our study in the dust, like the prophet Ezekiel, and we end like another Old Testament figure, Moses, coming down from the mountain with faces shining from the glory of God we have just glimpsed.



Pursuing Beauty

The Necessity of Humility

In the current day, we are taught by many writers and preachers, religious or otherwise, to begin our spiritual quests, our faith journeys, with ourselves. We are encouraged to seek God because He can meet our needs and satisfy our deepest desires. There is some truth to this claim, but the fundamental duty of every person before the holy God is to humble themselves (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Unlike what certain leaders tell us, we do not come to God and begin articulating a list of deep-seated desires and needs. If we have biblical faith, we must fall before our majestic God, trembling to be in His presence, rejoicing that because of the blood of Christ we have access to Him and will not be crushed by the weight of His glory. If we have been taught that religion is all about us, if we find ourselves breathing the “me-centered” air of our

day, then we must cleanse ourselves, reorient our minds, and approach God in a new way.

Because God is God, He must first be honored and treasured and revered. In our hearts, we must follow Edwards as he follows various biblical figures, and humble ourselves before the Lord (2 Chronicles 7:14, for example). In doing so, we will truly care for ourselves. In dying to ourselves, we will live to Christ (Philippians 1:20). We need not reject concern for our souls and our eternal good, but we do need to rightly focus that concern upon a righteous, holy God.

This will mean that we may have to make some changes in our spiritual lives. Some of the books that we read, the preachers that we listen to, the things that we've learned to tell ourselves, we must set aside. We must take practical steps in our self-centered world to embrace the radically biblical truth that life is about God first, and then about us. We are not Him, and we must not live as such. True knowledge of God begins with humility, quietness before the Lord, and a willingness to listen to God's Word and to order our lives according to it (Proverbs 1:7). Only when we possess and practice this mindset can we fully appreciate the beauty of the One who in His mercy has claimed us through the death and resurrection of His Son and the regeneration of His Spirit.

Applying the Knowledge of God to Our Lives

The study of God's attributes provides nearly endless fuel for the daily life of the Christian. Contrary to what many

think, these doctrines are not dry or lifeless, but packed with spiritual food by which to nourish our lives. It would help to take considerable chunks of time to think about each of the seven attributes of God explored by Edwards in his priceless sermon. Meditating on and applying each attribute to real-life situations will transform our daily lives. We may not be able to change all of the circumstances that affect us, but we can make our lives beautiful as we study the beauty of the God we serve.

There are many applications of the seven attributes of God to our lives. The fact that God is eternal can give us great encouragement as our lives hurry on (Revelation 22:13). Reigning over us is a timeless God who holds each moment of our lives in His hands and who has planned each of them to give Him glory in some way. Pondering this reality can free us from anxiety as we realize that the Lord has counted each of our days and is using them for His purpose. Remembering His timelessness will calm us and restrain us from a frenetic pattern of life.

The Lord is great (Psalm 96). Though it can be initially puzzling to think about how God's grandeur applies to our lives, we can find incredible comfort in this fact. God is not small, He is not limited. He is limitless. He is majestic. We are small and finite. Even the most fleeting recognition of this reality can free us from pride. Compared to the living God, what is the wisest person, the strongest athlete, the scariest enemy? Remembering this will cause us to rein in our natural arrogance and to worship the great God of heaven and earth.

Our God is lovely (Psalm 90:17). His beauty is undimmed. Nothing can or will change this aspect of His nature. Though

we are so often tempted by beautiful things on this earth, we believers have been claimed by a being far more beautiful and lovely than anything in creation. We have not of course seen God in person, but we have seen His character, and read of His splendor, and discovered His excellent Son, and these vistas can lift us from giving in to temptation to lesser things if we simply raise our vision on a regular basis to behold the beauty of the Lord.

The Creator is powerful (Psalm 93). He is the only one who truly deserves the title *awesome*. His strength, like His scope, is limitless. He can do whatever He pleases. Contemplating this trait will enable us to claim strength in areas where we are weak and to find release from self-dependency. Sooner or later, our strength will fail. We will inevitably and repeatedly lose the ability to control our lives and create good for ourselves and our loved ones. How helpful it will be for us to think about the might of God and to allow our understanding and of this strength to shape the way we live our lives in dependence on the Lord.

The Lord is wise (Proverbs 2). Over all the false wisdom that we trust, and over all the foolish thinking we think is wise, the wisdom of the Lord is right and true. In a world where so many clamor for our allegiance, we must remember that only the Lord is truly wise. Our hearts are calibrated by our sinful natures to stray from Him and His wisdom. We cannot forget this reality, and we need to constantly read Scripture to come into contact with divine wisdom and to keep ourselves from embracing folly.

The Most High is holy (1 Samuel 2:2). He is spotless and pure. He has no blemish, and none can find fault with Him. As the Lord is holy, so are we called to be holy (1 Peter 1:13–16). The chief way to become holy is not to start out by following a list of rules, but to examine the Lord’s character, to know His Word, and to follow the example of His Son. The local church will help us greatly in learning what it means to be holy, for there we find people who are living holy lives not to check off legalistic boxes, but to present their entire beings as a thank offering to God. How crucial, then, that we join and become active members in our local churches, where we can learn God’s Word and encourage one another to conform our lives to it.

Our heavenly Father, finally, is good (Psalm 135:3). His goodness extends throughout our lives. Perhaps the best way to apply the doctrine of God’s goodness is to live a perpetually thankful life (1 Thessalonians 5:18). In so doing we will honor Him who gave His Son for us—the greatest expression of mercy and kindness the world has ever known.

Meditation on these attributes is meant to provide fuel for faith and love of God. Every Christian would do well to consider them in personal devotions and to be involved in a God-centered local church dedicated to a “high view” of God, with preaching that expounds the truths of God’s nature. A vibrant devotional life and involved congregational life cannot trouble-proof one’s Christian walk, but each will greatly assist the believer in looking beyond this world to the realm where our Redeemer dwells.

JONATHAN
EDWARDS
on THE GOOD LIFE

THE ESSENTIAL
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CHAPTER ONE



The Nearness of the Good Life



The gaze is direct. The posture is straight. The face is serious, even stern. In his portraits, Jonathan Edwards stares back at the viewer. To a person unfamiliar with the theologian, he looks like any other stereotypical colonial parson, severe and austere, brooking no foolishness, itching to declaim the evils of everyday life. Wearing a powdered wig of tight white curls, staring alertly back at the observer, Jonathan Edwards as portrayed on canvas seems to substantiate the image of Edwards cultivated for generations in high-school classrooms. Here is the man who unleashed the thunder of “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Small wonder that such a gloomy person would bore into us from his portrait.

But appearances are often deceiving. In reality, Jonathan Edwards was not an angry man. He was one of the happiest men around. He loved to play and talk with his children, and he enjoyed much cheer and laughter in his marriage to his wife, Sarah. He cherished his time in his study. Jonathan's happiness, however, transcended the joys of home and work, significant as they are. Unlike many people, Jonathan Edwards knew happiness at the very core of his being. In a way that many of us don't even think about, Edwards possessed a holistic intellectual and spiritual happiness. He strove to know God with his mind, to experience the goodness of God with his heart, and to lead others to do the same. Though his temperament was calm, he lived with zest and vigor, modeling the happy way of life he taught his people.

Many people today do not know such peace and happiness. They live with constant tension, often acting contrary to what their mind and their conscience tell them is right. They rebel against their Creator and His design for their life. Though they may know satisfaction for a brief period, lasting happiness evades them. This results in a broken, frustrating, ultimately pointless life.

Though his era differed from ours, Jonathan identified the same problem in his day. Gifted from his youth with great passion for God and His Word, Jonathan discovered early on in his life that true and lasting happiness in this life was attainable. All that the human heart desired it could have, and far more besides. The riches of God's Word could satisfy the intellectual hunger of the human mind for a balanced, co-

hesive, meaningful worldview and the spiritual hunger of the human heart for a joyful, hopeful, transformative existence.

In sum, Jonathan discovered a simple but vitalizing truth: God had not made mankind to be miserable. Being a Christian did not mean the absence of pleasure. Much to the contrary, God had made mankind to experience unending delight and joy in Him, to be happier and happier as knowledge of God increased, and to constantly soak up the sweetest pleasure the world affords in the life of faith—all of which flow together to constitute “the good life.” In a world filled with people who lived in the gloom of darkness, Jonathan Edwards preached to set his hearers’ hearts on fire, to alter forever the way they understood themselves and their lives. He knew that any life created by the majestic, undomesticated, loving God of the Bible could not be mundane or boring. He preached in such a way as to altogether change the way we think about our faith and the way we practice it.

In this chapter, we will explore the initial, pre-fall design of God for human life through interaction with a number of noteworthy Edwardsean texts: *The Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, the *Dissertation Concerning the Nature of True Virtue*, the sermon “Charity Contrary to a Selfish Spirit,” and the homily “The Pleasantness of Religion.” By careful study of these sources, we will develop an understanding of the original intention of the Creator for mankind and clear our minds of false and unbiblical conceptions of the good, Christian life. God, we shall see in this chapter, has not made people to be grimly obedient.

Rather, He desires that we find transcendent, unassailable, undimmed satisfaction in Him.

God the Foundation

The foundation of the good life is God. In Edwards's world, God reigned over all as the emblem of majesty, authority, and goodness. The sum of His perfections rendered God beautiful, or more accurately, Beauty itself. As covered in *Jonathan Edwards on Beauty*, also in this series, God created the world to display and reflect His glory. All that the eye can see exists to “remanate,” or send back, God's original glory to Himself. God alone is worthy of such a system, for He alone is God. All of creation participates in this “cycle of beauty” that begins with God and returns to God.

But while all things in some way display and reflect the beauty of God, only humans may do so with awareness. Only mankind can participate consciously in the cycle of beauty. It was for this very purpose that God created the race. He desired a special sort of being to commune with Him and to joyfully image His goodness in the world. Edwards discussed this in his foundational text *The End for Which God Created the World*:

IT SEEMS TO BE A THING in itself fit and desirable, that the glorious perfections of God should be known, and the operations and expressions of them seen by other beings besides himself. . . . As God's perfections are things in them-

selves excellent, so the expression of them in their proper acts and fruits is excellent, and the knowledge of these excellent perfections, and of these glorious expressions of them, is an excellent thing, the existence of which is in itself valuable and desirable.

Because God was so excellent, it was only right that His excellence be enjoyed by others:

'TIS A THING INFINITELY GOOD in itself that God's glory should be known by a glorious society of created beings. And that there should be in them an increasing knowledge of God to all eternity is an existence, a reality infinitely worthy to be, and worthy to be valued and regarded by him, to whom it belongs in order that it be, which, of all things possible, is fittest and best. If existence is more worthy than defect and nonentity, and if any created existence is in itself worthy to be, then knowledge or understanding is a thing worthy to be; and if any knowledge, then the most excellent sort of knowledge, viz. that of God and his glory. The existence of the created universe consists as much in it as in anything: yea, this knowledge is one of the highest, most real and substantial parts, of all created existence most remote from nonentity and defect. (*Works* 8, 430–32)

The passage touches on numerous ideas, but the key sentence for our purposes is this: "'Tis a thing infinitely good in itself that God's glory should be known by a glorious society of created beings." Edwards believed that mankind was made for an "increasing knowledge of God," a knowledge of "the most excellent sort" that would satisfy and fill the mind and heart as nothing else can. Adam and Eve, and the race they produced, were not mere chess pawns in the hands of the Grandmaster, but possessed a supremely noble purpose that would make for a life of the most exhilarating kind.

The Good Life Does Not Squash Happiness

In giving his picture of the good life, Edwards had to overcome two specific objections. First, he had to show how a universe that existed to glorify God did not squash or prohibit the happiness of mankind. Central to the following passage is the idea that God "emanates" or sends His beauty (or glory) out, and the creature receives and delights in it. Edwards teaches us here that the happiness of God and the happiness of humanity are not, as some have suggested, at odds. Instead, God and man ideally work in harmony, with God "emanating" glory that is received and reflected by mankind, who grows happy in performing this divine duty:

GOD IN SEEKING HIS GLORY, therein seeks the good of his creatures: because the emanation of his glory (which he seeks and delights in, as he delights in himself and his own

eternal glory) implies the communicated excellency and happiness of his creature. And that in communicating his fullness for them, he does it for himself: because their good, which he seeks, is so much in union and communion with himself. God is their good. Their excellency and happiness is nothing but the emanation and expression of God's glory: God in seeking their glory and happiness, seeks himself: and in seeking himself, i.e. himself diffused and expressed (which he delights in, as he delights in his own beauty and fullness), he seeks their glory and happiness.

Edwards continued the argument by putting it in grander terms:

IN THIS VIEW IT APPEARS that God's respect to the creature, in the whole, unites with his respect to himself. Both regards are like two lines which seem at the beginning to be separate, but aim finally to meet in one, both being directed to the same center. And as to the good of the creature itself, if viewed in its whole duration, and infinite progression, it must be viewed as infinite; and so not only being some communication of God's glory, but as coming nearer and nearer to the same thing in its infinite fullness. The nearer anything comes to infinite, the nearer it comes to an identity with God. And if any good, as viewed by God, is beheld as infinite, it can't be viewed as a distinct thing from God's own infinite glory. (*Works* 8, 459)

In this passage, Edwards refutes the charge that God's glory and man's happiness are mutually exclusive. His central point is that "God in seeking his glory, therein seeks the good of his creatures." As some mistakenly believed, if God is going to be happy, then He will create a world that pleases only Himself and that yields little or no happiness to the people placed in the world to do His bidding. Humanity functions as little more than a race of slaves forced to execute the tyrannical will of a cruel king. Edwards, however, shows that this line of thought fails miserably. God, if He is God, is not a tyrant. As God, He is the embodiment of goodness. "[T]he emanation of his glory (which he seeks and delights in, as he delights in himself and his own eternal glory)," then, "implies the communicated excellency and happiness of his creature." Life as this kind and awesome God created it to be cannot be slavish or sad; it is filled with "excellency and happiness" that flows from the divine fountain.

All of the God-centered life is calibrated to bless the people of God as they glorify the Lord in all they do (1 Corinthians 10:31). Those who seek the Lord and live to magnify Him will know His "communicated excellency and happiness" even as they participate in the great work of glorifying Him. God's glory and man's happiness are not at odds with one another—far from it. The two ideally work hand in hand.

Thus we see Edwards's brilliant and transformative doctrine of the good life. At its deepest, most profound level, the good life is the life lived for the glory of God. Those who live to display and image the beauty of God will, in whatever cir-

cumstance they find themselves, experience happiness that comes directly from God Himself. Happiness, then, is not a state outside of ourselves that we must strive for. It does not ebb and flow with our life situation. Happiness is doing the will of God, for the will of God always yields the glory of God. What is the will of God? It is God's revealed purposes and desires in the Bible. In short, the good life is the existence that takes shape according to the teachings and commands of Scripture. When one obeys God by loving His Son and following His Word, one glorifies the Lord and tastes the sweetest, richest happiness known to man. This and no other substitute is the good life. It is what God has always intended for mankind.

The Good Life Does Not Destroy Self-Love

In unfurling his vision of the good life, Edwards had to overcome a second objection. He had to show how the God-centered life corresponded with the natural human instinct to love and preserve oneself, which he defined as follows: "Self-love, I think, is generally defined: a man's love of his own happiness" (*Works* 8, 575). Did living for God, in other words, mean that one had to sacrifice concern for oneself and adopt a pattern of living that impeded happiness for the sake of obeying God?

Edwards had a ready answer to this question. He refused, at the start, to separate love for God and love for oneself. One best loved oneself by loving God. Loving oneself without God

meant that one strayed from the source of all wisdom and truth, and thus consigned oneself to destruction. On the contrary, loving oneself through loving God meant that one experienced the joys of the virtuous life. Instead of living selfishly, mankind could live for God and experience His boundless goodness. In doing so, they would actually care for themselves far better than if they ignored the Lord and went their own way.

Edwards, we see, also refused to separate happiness from obedience. He argued that exercising virtue in service to God actually enabled a person to love themselves best. "True virtue," he argued in *Dissertation Concerning the Nature of True Virtue*, "most essentially consists in benevolence to Being in general. Or perhaps to speak more accurately, it is that consent, propensity and union of heart to Being in general, that is immediately exercised in a general good will" (*Works* 8, 540). The "Being" of which Edwards spoke was God and the system of creaturely being He had created. Living a life of "benevolence" (or loving goodwill) toward God and His creatures meant that one possessed "true virtue." Virtue and happiness actually went hand in hand. When one acted virtuously to others out of a desire to love God and preserve his soul, he found true happiness. Happiness did not come from gratification of one's selfish instincts, but rather from one's desire to bless others and please the Lord.

In the final analysis, Edwards revealed that virtue and self-preservation did not naturally conflict. God designed man to be good. When a person acts on these instincts and lives a life of "benevolence" to God and, accordingly, to his fellow

man, he preserves his soul and, as a result, loves himself more than the person who lives without virtue and who operates out of selfishness. Christianity, the life of Spirit-empowered virtue, does not require that one sacrifice happiness. As a believer in Christ lives the good life of obedience to the Lord, he tastes true and lasting happiness, blesses God and mankind, and ultimately preserves his soul. Edwards's doctrine expresses on a theological level the simple truth taught by Christ centuries before in Matthew 16:25: "Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

A Deeply Ironic Doctrine

The Edwardsean doctrine of happiness is rich with irony. To save one's soul and experience deepest delight one must abandon the instinct to selfishly pursue one's well-being. True self-interest involves turning one's life over to God and accepting His plan for life over against anything the human mind can conceive. One cannot win salvation and happiness for oneself by selfish cunning or slick plans. If one desires to know happiness in this life and the next, one must hand one's life over to the Lord. A Christian is a person who hands the keys over to Jesus. The believer trusts Him to lead and guide, knowing that whatever way He directs will be best.

It may not always appear this way, of course. One may trust Christ and find that the going soon gets rough. This is no indication that Christ has failed and that happiness is lost.

While God often allows His children to feel happy because of favorable circumstances, His fundamental gift to believers is not the promise of a life without challenges, but a state of deep happiness rooted in Himself that transcends all situations, good or ill. This is the kind of happiness that lasts beyond a mood or an emotional high. It is a persevering, bold happiness that is rooted in faith in God and love for God.

Some people who know this Edwardsean kind of happiness, this rich brand of spiritual joy, express it with great emotion. Edwards himself regularly experienced a sort of rapturous communion with God. Others, however, express their joy in quieter form, their deep satisfaction in Him manifesting itself in a quiet, contented way of life. Neither mode is best; both are valid and good. The challenge for most of us is to find the happiness common to both groups of happy believers. Too many Christians fail to taste the profound satisfaction offered them in the gospel. They have a sense of their salvation, but they have little awareness of the greatness of the gospel and its ability to altogether transform their existence. They know that God wants them to be happy, but they have not realized that joy comes not primarily from having one's desires met by God, but by serving God and doing what He desires.

Life in Uncomfortable Tension

Too many of us live in a strenuous push-and-pull relationship with the Lord. We obey Him, to some extent, but we also push for the accomplishment of our plans, the fulfillment

of our desires, not realizing that He has a better plan and better desires for us. The happiest Christians are not those who manage to accomplish all of their personal goals. Rather, the happiest Christians are those who embrace what God wants for their lives. Thus the irony of faith reveals itself once again. One does not become happy by liberating oneself from duty; one becomes happy by obeying and following the plans of the Lord, who in turn provides the happiness one naturally desires. In duty, in serving the Lord, we find true happiness.

In his sermon "Charity Contrary to a Selfish Spirit," Edwards highlighted this theme as he exhorted his Northampton congregation to live charitably, or lovingly, with their fellow men. He taught them that their performance of charity would not diminish their own happiness, but would increase it to a depth that they had never thought possible. Fundamentally, said the pastor:

A CHRISTIAN SPIRIT SEEKS to please and glorify God. The things which are well pleasing to God and Christ, and tend to the glory of Christ, are called the things of Jesus Christ in opposition to our own things. Philippians 2:21, "For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's." Christianity requires that we should make God and Christ our main end. Christians, so far as they live like Christians, live so that for them to live is Christ [Philippians 1:21]. Christians are required to live so as to please God. Romans 12:2, "That ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and

perfect will of God." We should be such servants of Christ as do in all things seek to please our Master. Ephesians 6:6, "Not with eye-service as men-pleasers: but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart." So we are required to seek the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10:31, "Whether there-fore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." And this is the Christian spirit. (*Works* 8, 259)

Having defined "the Christian spirit" as that which "seeks to please and glorify God," Edwards discussed how divine love far exceeds natural "self-love":

BUT DIVINE LOVE or that Christian charity which is spoken of in the text is something above self-love, as it is super-natural or above and beyond all that is natural. It is no branch which springs out of that root of self-love as natural affection and civil friendship, and the love which wicked men may have one to another. It is something of a higher and more noble kind. Self-love is the sum of natural principles, as divine love is of supernatural principles. This divine love is no plant which grows naturally in such a soil as the heart of man. But it is a plant transplanted into the soul out of heaven; it is something divine, something from the holy and blessed Spirit of God, and so has its foundation in God, and not in self. (*Works* 8, 263-4)

Edwards provides a memorable image to describe the source of charity. The love in a Christian's heart "is a plant transplanted into the soul out of heaven." This plant, a gift from "the holy and blessed Spirit of God," causes the believer to live for God with God squarely in one's line of sight. As one matures, one's love for God and His creation spills over into the lives of others, just as a maturing plant or tree stretches across an ever-widening distance and shelters it. The believer who seeks to live for God ultimately cannot avoid blessing others.

Edwards next sketched how believers could embody this spirit:

A CHRISTIAN SPIRIT DISPOSES them in many cases to forego and part with their own things for the sake of the things of others. It disposes them to part with their own private temporal interest, and totally and finally to renounce it, for the sake of the honor of God and the advancement of the kingdom of Christ. Such was the spirit of the Apostle. Acts 21:13, "I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die for the name of the Lord Jesus." And they have a spirit to forego and part with their own private interest for the good of their neighbors in many instances; ready to help bear others' burdens, to part with a less good of their own for the sake of a greater of their neighbors'; and as the case may be, to lay down their lives for the brethren [1 John 3:16]. (*Works* 8, 259)

The pastor closed with a stirring summation of the nature and power of Christian charity:

AND THEREFORE DIVINE and Christian love, above all love in the world, is contrary to a selfish spirit. Though other-love, a moral love, may in some respects be contrary to selfishness, as it may move men to a moral liberality and generosity, yet in other respects it agrees with a selfish spirit; because if we follow it up to its original, it arises from the same root, viz. a principle of self-love. But divine love has its spring elsewhere; its root is in Christ Jesus, and so is heavenly. It is not anything of this world, and it tends thither whence it comes. As it does not spring out of self, so neither does it tend to self. It delights in the honor and glory of God for his own sake, and not merely for their sakes. And it seeks and delights in the good of men for their sakes, and for God's sake. How Christian love is in a peculiar manner above and contrary to a selfish spirit appears by this, viz. it goes out even to enemies. There is that in the nature and tendency of it to go out to the unthankful and evil, and to those that injure and hate us, which is directly contrary to the tendency of a selfish principle, and quite above nature. (*Works* 8, 264)

In these sections, Edwards captured the special nature of Christian happiness. Rooted in “divine love,” Christians act out of an “other-love” that simultaneously blesses their fellow man and cares for their own soul. In doing so, they find true and lasting happiness. This brand of existence counters sharply the thinking of sinful natural man, which is driven by a selfish and deeply proud mind-set. The Christian life, the good life, is driven by a selfless and humble mindset. Though it might seem natural to devote all kinds of attention to one’s own needs, the Christian goes the opposite way and humbly seeks to serve even his enemies. Here is love that turns the thinking of the natural mind on its head. Love of this kind is both deeply ironic and unquestionably divine.

The Happiest Person Who Ever Lived

Edwards’s doctrine of happiness and the good life helps us to see how Jesus Christ, despite all the injustices thrust upon Him, was the happiest person who ever lived. Christ devoted every second of His life to serving God and blessing His people. Though He often faced great trials, Jesus knew a satisfaction that no human hand could diminish. Even in His agonizing crucifixion, Jesus rested firmly in the will of God, and endured the agonies of Calvary “for the joy set before Him” (Hebrews 12:2). Though the cross itself produced no happiness in Jesus, submission to God’s will did. Christ’s example brings home how important it is to understand that happiness is not simply an emotional state. It is both emotion

and commitment, both outward exultation and inner satisfaction. As we follow Jesus and obey the Father, serving our fellow man with love in our hearts, we make ourselves happy in the most profound sense, just like Jesus Himself.

We should emphasize that we are not constructing a merely intellectual argument here. There is delight of the most intense and lasting kind in vibrant Christian faith. At one point in his sermon corpus, Edwards went so far as to say that the goodness of Christianity is such that even if Christianity is not true, it still provides the best way to live. It is such a pleasant way to live that it would be the best lifestyle even if the Bible were not true. "Seeing it is so," the pastor concluded in his sermon entitled "The Pleasantness of Religion," "that 'tis worth the while to be religious if it were only for the delight and pleasantness of it, then hence we may learn that sinners are left without any manner of objection against religion" (Kimnach, 23). Edwards believed firmly that Christianity offered humanity the deepest pleasure possible. Even the most apparently happy worldly life could not compare to biblical faith:

[H]OW EXCEEDING GREAT is the reward of the godly. What a reward have they in the world to come; what joys [in another life]. But yet this is not all; no, they have a reward in this life. In the very keeping of God's commands, there is great reward (Ps. 19:11). The reward they have in hand, besides that which is promised, is well worth all the pains

they take, all the troubles they endure. God has not only promised them a great reward, and exceeding great beyond conception; but he has given them a foretaste in this world. And this taste is better than all the pleasure and riches of the wicked. (Kinnach, 24)

The Christian faith was true, according to Edwards. He made this very clear in countless sermons and writings. It yielded both a joyful earthly life and an endlessly happy existence in heaven. In comparison to the richest sinner, even the poorest Christian possessed wealth beyond belief. While the “wicked” courted temporal pleasure, the Christian experienced in the good life a “foretaste” of heaven that nothing could ruin or spoil.

The Northampton pastor’s preaching illuminated the divine nature of earthly Christian life. All who would follow Christ would find that it not only satisfied the soul on earth, but placed them on the trajectory of heaven. Though this world dealt “pains” and “troubles” to the people of God, Edwards knew that these things would soon pass, and the church would reach its destination, tasting sumptuous delights not even the richest pleasure-seeker could imagine.

The Happiness of the Good Life

All of the preceding material shapes and perhaps alters our understanding of Jonathan Edwards. The man who wears the slightest of smiles in his portrait may not be the vindictive,

pleasure-squashing parson some imagine him to be. Edwards's conception of the good life suggests that Edwards was much happier than we might initially think. Certainly, life as he pictured it in its ideal form reflected an existence of the most satisfied kind. This life, as we have seen, was no exercise in sinful hedonism, but was instead a lifelong walk of faith on the biblical path. This life glorified God and made men happy. It did not conflict with self-interest, it included continual service to God and man, and it required humility and sacrifice. The good life included noteworthy irony that turned conventional human wisdom on its head. It was demanding, challenging, and deeply involved, yet it offered humanity the opportunity to taste the very goodness and love and peace of God.

Such was life as God created it to be.



Living the Good Life

We Are Made to Be Happy

It is imperative that we realize that God has not designed us for a somber, miserable subsistence of a life. He has made us to be unshakably happy. Our first order of business in processing Edwards's illumination of this biblical teaching is to enter the thought stream of our minds, so to speak, and to banish any thinking that undermines the idea that God wants

us to be happy in Him. He does not want to squelch our pleasure, and He does not parse out a crumb of blessing at a time for us to sample. God intends to pour a flood of happiness into our lives, and He will do so if we only recognize that this is so (Psalm 128; Jeremiah 32:36–41).

This means on a practical level that we must reorient our thoughts, our words, and our actions. We must not doubt our Lord and His good plan for our lives. We should not speak against the Lord and complain to other people about our circumstances. Romans 8:31–39 teaches us that every single thing that occurs in our lives is placed before us to sanctify us and to glorify God. How, then, can we doubt the Lord? We must accept whatever comes from His hand and remember that He has our happiness in mind, not our misery. This reorientation of thinking and acting will help us to switch from a glum, self-defeated way of life into a courageous, defiantly joyful existence that smacks of another world.

Obedience Is Joy

Edwards shows us that the happiest people on earth are not those who do whatever they naturally, sinfully want to do, but those who do what God desires. God, being all-wise and all-good, has designed the ideal way of life. This way of life involves obedience, or submission, to the divine will (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Obedience, then, is joy; following God is happiness (see 1 John 3 for a similar theme). Knowing and applying this truth to our lives will free us from thinking that,

though saved, we're missing out on the really good stuff of life that the unredeemed around us get to enjoy every day. If we understand that we're heaven bound, and that all our obedience brings both blessing on earth and an eternal reward in the afterlife, we'll avoid much of the doleful thinking of misled Christians. The good stuff, and the good life, is not to be had in the world of sin, but in the world of faith.

Obedience doesn't always *seem* happy. Sometimes, it's very difficult. But the fact that sin is easy and obedience can be difficult does not mean that sin is right and obedience is wrong. We must guard ourselves against an emotionally driven Christianity that operates out of the satisfaction of whatever momentary desire presents itself. The most robust faith will both engage one's emotions, ensuring that we live a genuinely happy life, and motivate us to obey the Word of God, allowing us to avoid the constant ups and downs of a weak-willed Christianity. God, we must remember, desires to pour happiness into our lives. As the accounts of numerous biblical figures show us, when we follow our Savior and live for His glory, shunning worldly temptations that snap at our feet to trap and destroy us, we set ourselves up to receive in this life and the next the blessings of God (see, for example, Genesis 39–47 and Daniel 1–7). Obedience, then, is not a death to vitality, but a means to happiness.

Be Happy in Serving Others

As we orient our lives around obedience to God's Word, we will find that we cannot help but care for God's handiwork in creation. We'll have an increased desire to steward the earth well, but we'll primarily desire to bless the apex of God's creative work, the human race. As those who have been made deeply happy by God, we'll want others to know that same happiness, and to turn away from the sinful patterns of living that promise so much but deliver so little. We'll seek to care for all people by meeting their earthly needs as best we can with wisdom and discernment, and we'll try to tell them about the source of all happiness, God, as He has revealed Himself in His Word (see Luke 10:25–37, for example, and Galatians 6:10). The ways in which Christians share the good life and the good news will vary according to place and situation, but all Christians who desire to be truly happy will channel their love for God into evangelistic service to their fellow man. This is not some kind of programmatic requirement that believers fulfill, but is a natural overflow of the love for God and His creation that the Spirit of God creates in a believer's heart. Christians should seek opportunities for evangelism and action in their local church, using it as a base from which to work.

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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 illume 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” (30%). 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” (39%) 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

In 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.

*JONATHAN
EDWARDS
on TRUE CHRISTIANITY*

THE ESSENTIAL
EDWARDS
COLLECTION

OWEN STRACHAN *and* DOUGLAS SWEENEY

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CHAPTER ONE



The Contemporary Problem of Nominal Christianity

*F*ew things in the world speak to the soul with greater depth than a committed marriage relationship. When two people share love and cling to one another through decades of life, weathering trials, tragedies, and tense times, they offer the world an image of a greater reality.

But if the sweetness of true love easily moves us, the specter of half-hearted marital commitment equally raises our passions. Many of us have watched with sorrow and surprise as the covenants of many couples collapse. We have seen the story play out time and time again: the sweethearts everyone admires marry and raise adorable children in a happy home. Without warning, the marriage crumbles, often as a result of

a spouse's unfaithfulness. Though everything seemed so perfect, we learn in the end that all was not well. There may have been sparks of true affection over the years, but ultimately, what looked like love was no love at all.

Relating Marriage and Faith

This situation parallels a matter of even greater significance: Christian faith. Just as marriage is not merely a slip of paper and a big ceremony, Christian faith is not merely a one-time confession of Christ and occasional church attendance. If we would reach heaven, if we would truly live by faith, we must be personally transformed by God such that we pursue Him, however imperfectly, on a constant basis. This, at base, is the nature of Christianity. Though still bearing sin, we fight for holiness and watch as God, over time, conforms us to the image of His Son. We back up our “profession”—our verbal commitment—to God by our lives, thus showing ourselves to be truly saved (see 1 John 1).

Unashamed sinners and passionate Christians form two clear scriptural groups. The Bible deals extensively with the unredeemed and the redeemed. But the Scripture also recognizes a third group. This group mirrors the half-hearted spouse discussed above: the lukewarm, interested but non-committal, nominal Christian who professes true faith but shows little evidence of it (nominal refers to “name,” that is, a faith in name only). To this group the voices of Scripture also devote much attention. The prophets call Israel to stop

wandering from God; Jesus Christ tells deeply frightening stories about those who pursue Him half-heartedly (see Matthew 13:1–23, for example); Revelation informs us that at the last judgment, the Lord will spew the lukewarm from His mouth (Revelation 3:16). In these and many other instances, the Scripture warns the nominal Christian of clear and present danger. We are not merely dealing with earthly situations here. On the matter of true Christianity, we are confronting matters of eternal consequence.

Nominal Christianity in Our Day

As we will see in the quotations and statistics that follow, lukewarm faith is alive and well in our evangelical churches. By studying this problem in its contemporary form, we prepare ourselves to enter Jonathan Edwards's world in coming chapters.

Nominal Christianity is a notoriously difficult problem to trace and spot. Like a transmittable illness, one knows it's out there, but one can't pinpoint exactly where. Two things are immediately clear, though: the state of maturity of many Christians is quite low, and many churches are failing to educate their people in the basics of Christianity.

Confused Beliefs

Pollsters D. Michael Lindsay and George Gallup conducted research several years ago that revealed alarming

beliefs among a significant number of people who claim to be evangelical.

According to Lindsay and Gallup, of those claiming to be born again:

- 33% hold a pro-choice stance on abortion
- 26% believe in astrology
- 20% believe in reincarnation (Lindsay, 40)

Many of these people are likely in evangelical churches that ostensibly teach biblical doctrine, and yet they hold views on various spiritual and moral subjects that directly conflict with the biblical witness. If their beliefs conflict with true Christianity, it is likely that their lives conflict as well.

Deficient Living

In a study of members of prominent evangelical megachurches, Rodney Stark found the following data:

- ONLY 46% attend services weekly or more often
- Only 46% tithe
- Only 33% read the Bible daily (Stark, 47)

When Stark and his researchers asked the megachurch members the following question, *“How often in the last month did you participate in witnessing/sharing your faith with strangers?”*

the following percentage answered that they witnessed one or more times:

- All Conservative Protestants 44%
- All Liberal Protestants 19% (Stark, 25)

This could initially seem encouraging. When one considers, though, that more than half of all *conservative* Protestants, people who seemingly have a great concern for personal evangelism, did not share their faith even once in the month with an unbeliever, reality begins to sink in.

A recent survey by an evangelical megachurch backed up this conclusion. It revealed that a significant number of its members who self-identified as spiritually healthy—“close to Christ” and “Christ-centered” were the words used in the survey—also marked themselves as “spiritually stalled” and “dissatisfied.” *Christianity Today* commented on the survey that “About a quarter of the ‘stalled’ segment and 63 percent of the ‘dissatisfied’ segment contemplated leaving the church.” (CT) These findings come from a seemingly thriving church reaching many thousands of people each year.

It is true that all Christians sometimes feel “stalled” in their faith. Sin is a part of our lives, and it will not leave us until we reach the other side. But because of the vast number of members who described themselves in this way, these numbers do not indicate health in the church.

Biblical Illiteracy

In his book *Today's Pastors*, George Barna documents the disheartening results of his study of the biblical literacy or knowledge of many Christians. First, Barna found that just four out of ten Christians read their Bible on a weekly basis. Second, according to Barna:

THOSE PEOPLE WHO DO READ will commit about one hour to Bible reading during the week. Those people actually will spend more time showering, commuting to and from work, watching television, reading the newspaper, eating meals or talking on the telephone. Obviously, the Bible is not a high priority in the lives of most people. (Barna, 48)

If we're still skeptical about the specter of listless Christianity, this statistic wakes us up. The decided minority of professing Christians who do crack the pages of the Word of God spend less time in it each week *than they do in the shower*.

David Wells, the eminent theologian and critic of evangelicalism, cites other Barna polls that show that a majority—52%—of evangelicals “reject the idea of original sin outright” (*Courage to Be Protestant*, 57). This means that a majority of professing believers simply reject one of the core doctrines of a Christian view of mankind altogether. Furthermore, Wells cites statistics that show that only 32% of professing evangel-

icals believe in absolutes in truth or morality (*Above All Earthly Pow'rs*, 93). These are the sort of statements we expect from outspoken unbelievers, not professing Christians.

The Problem of Pornography

The harmful effects of pornography are well-known. Yet the church, commissioned to be an outpost of holiness in a world of evil, has struggled mightily to help its members turn away from pornography. Some of the most discouraging data comes from pastors, those charged to lead congregations through holy lives. The following data comes from the Safe Families website (www.safe-families.org):

- 37% of pastors say pornography is a current struggle
- In another survey, over half of evangelical pastors admitted viewing pornography last year
- Of pastors who had visited a porn site, 53% had visited such sites “a few times” in the past year, and 18% visit sexually explicit sites between a couple of times a month and more than once a week

If the pastors of God’s churches are struggling as mightily as these polls suggest, one wonders how church members, many of them far less spiritually mature than pastors, are faring in the fight against lust.

The Tragedy of Divorce

Other data indicate that the church is not only failing in its mission to be distinct and unique, but it is full of the same cultural sins that the world practices. In some cases, the church actually may be *surpassing* the world in its sins. In 1999, the Barna Group found that conservative evangelicals apparently divorce at a higher rate than non-Christians. The following figures comparing rates of divorce between Christians and non-Christians echo this shocking claim:

- Non-Denominational 34%
 - Mainline Protestants 25%
 - Atheists/Agnostics 21%
- (www.associatedcontent.com)

This statistic paints an unflattering portrait of the state of Christian marriage. Of course, it needs to be qualified; one could point out here that professing Christians are more likely to marry than unbelievers and thus are more susceptible to divorce. One could also note that many conservative Christian theologians believe that divorce is allowed in some circumstances. With these points noted, though, it is clear that many Christians have bought into the American divorce culture. Rather than standing apart from the world in this area, many Christians mirror their unbelieving neighbors. In a society rapidly releasing itself from connection to Christian moral and theological thinking, many Christians are not even fighting

the cultural tide, let alone stemming it. It is sweeping them away.

Sub-Christian Faith Among Young Adults

The lives and testimony of our children, though surely not ultimately dependent on the faith of parents, reveal with painful precision just how much faith makes its way into nominally Christian homes. Interviewers and researchers who have talked with hundreds of children of conservative Christian parents have found that modern “church kids” live and talk much like their secular peers. Christian Smith, a sociologist who has extensively studied the lives of religious young people, has found that in general, American teens practice what he calls “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” a bland, relativistic spirituality that emphasizes doing good, feeling good, and believing in a benevolent, harmless, one-size-fits-all God. Smith’s book *Soul Searching* includes many brief and often depressing interviews with teens conducted by the sociologist and his staff. For example, Smith comments:

VIEWED IN TERMS of the absolute historical centrality of the Protestant conviction about salvation by God’s grace alone, through faith alone and not by any human good works, many belief professions by Protestant teens, including numerous conservative Protestant teens, in effect discard that essential Protestant gospel. One 15-year-old white

conservative Protestant boy from Mississippi, for instance, explained, "If you just do the right thing and don't do anything bad, I mean nothing really bad, you know you'll go to heaven. If you don't, you're screwed [laughs], that's about it." Similarly, this 16-year-old black conservative Protestant girl from Pennsylvania told us, "Being a Christian, um, don't do many sins, read the Bible, go to church, living godly, that's about it. It's basically not committing sin, basically." (Smith, 136)

In another section, Smith discusses the absence of a connection between biblical thinking and day-to-day life:

QUITE OFTEN, TEENS said they did not think their religious faith affected their family relationships, they did not believe religion was relevant to the conduct of a dating relationship, they did not see that religion affected their life at school, and so on. This was often even true for teens who in the religious discussion explicitly said that faith was important and influential in their lives. One 16-year-old white mainline Protestant girl from Michigan, for example, who explicitly stated, "Religion is very important to me," denied in every other section of the interview that religion had anything to do with her relationships, dating, school work, or any other aspect of her ordinary life. (Smith, 140)

One could cite numerous other examples from Smith's text that make this same point. At base, it is clear that many modern teens from a wide variety of churches have little sense of the personal importance and eternal significance of Christ and His Word.

The teenage years are known for their difficulty and turmoil, and that must be stated. In addition, Christian parents cannot produce faith in their children, and even the best parents may see their children drift away from the faith. But these necessary qualifications do not silence the point made above. On a broad level, Christians and churches are struggling to pass on biblical Christianity. Many of us are not living robustly Christian lives; a good portion of our children are not, either.

A Brief Sweep of Factors Behind the Current Situation

It is not the purpose of this chapter to exhaustively trace the factors that led to our current situation. We are more concerned with the state of things on the ground, and cannot take the space necessary to sketch out a full-fledged answer to this important question, so the following survey will be brief. Readers desiring to look into this further would do well to look at a number of volumes cited in this chapter, including David Wells's texts *No Place for Truth, Above All Earthly Powers*, and *The Courage to Be Protestant*.

To concisely identify a few key factors, we need to travel

back in time a couple of centuries to eighteenth-century Europe, the “Age of Lights” or “Enlightenment.” In this era, a number of key thinkers reacted against state churches and their dogma, labeling religious faith “superstition” and emphasizing the primacy of the human intellect. They questioned the authority and truthfulness of the Bible and sought to strip it of elements they deemed false and superstitious. It took some time for this manner of thinking to trickle down into society, but eventually, many European countries once characterized by religious faith became increasingly secularized in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This unbelieving line of thought spread to churches and seminaries and caused many in traditional church traditions to fall away from orthodox faith.

In time, religious leaders began to doubt even their hard-line liberal commitments. In the second half of the twentieth century, they accommodated to the secular “postmodern” spirit, avoiding “dogma” of any kind, and embracing mystery. Instead of emphasizing absolute truth, they spoke of truth for communities. That is, certain communities believed one way, and that was truth for them; others might believe something entirely different, and that was also true (for them). Some Christians from both conservative and liberal backgrounds adopted this spirit, creating a new kind of church, one light on doctrine and heavy on personal experience and mystery.

At the same time, the intellectual weakness of the church and the accommodation of its formative seminaries to liberal modes of thought drove many conservative Christian leaders

to look to the booming American business sector for clues to vitality and growth. In the process, some American Christians lost connection to a Bible-centered model of preaching and, accordingly, a biblical worldview. Others who remained consciously biblical concentrated themselves so narrowly on political and social concerns that they seemed to make the church another Political Action Committee. Many “mainline” churches adopted liberal doctrines and deemphasized or even discarded fundamental doctrines of Christianity, though in the present day, a biblical witness of varying size persists in some denominations. Still more professing Christians have lost confidence and interest in local churches and have invested in parachurch organizations, trusting national leaders and ministries to lead them from afar without meaningful contact with a body of believers.

Pragmatism and Postmodernism in the Church

With the rise of the financial market and the cultural abandonment of various tenets of a Christian worldview, many of our evangelical churches have shifted from a richly biblical and theological perspective to one driven by pragmatic concerns. Congregations often do not make this shift to spite doctrine; instead, they do it because they think it will bring health and growth. Though they may mean well, a concern for numbers over a concern for personal faith makes it easy for nominalism to creep into the church. When churches concentrate

so much on bringing people in, they can lose sight of building people up. That kind of atmosphere can make it easy for people to adopt a half-hearted faith, a Christianity that may be no Christianity at all.

Cultural critic Os Guinness has written persuasively about the pragmatic mindset in the church. He notes that

THE CONCERN “WILL IT WORK?” has long overshadowed “Is it true?” Theology has given way to technique. Know-whom has faded before know-how. Serving God has subtly been deformed into servicing the self. At its worst, the result is a shift from faith to the “faith in faith,” which—along with faith in religion—is a perniciously distinctive American heresy. But even at its best, pragmatism results in an evangelicalism rich in ingenuity and organization but poor in spirituality and superficial, if not banal, in doctrine. We have become the worldliest Christians in America. (Guinness, 59)

This is a key problem. As Guinness identifies, many of our churches have bought into the modern American consumer mindset in which we understand ourselves primarily as consumers and our churches as service-providers. Some pastors no longer preach prophetic, biblically robust, God-centered sermons meant to feed the people of God a delicious and healthy biblical “meal.” Instead, they offer the church short, airy homilies aimed at the practical and psychological “needs” of people.

Because size is at a premium in modern church life, many

Christians wander through their church buildings, not knowing where to begin to connect with believers on a meaningful level. The result is, in some cases, churches with huge membership rolls but little biblical discipleship and corporate involvement (the same can be true of small churches as well). Few people have effectively studied what our modern church culture, with its emphasis on size and numbers, has done to discipleship. Where are the vital intergenerational connections spoken of in the Pastoral Epistles (Titus 2, for example)? Where is church discipline and its essential display of the church's commitment to holiness before the Lord (Matthew 18:20)? How do Christians in large churches without significant corporate togetherness care for one another in meaningful ways (Galatians 6:2)? These and many other biblically derived questions go unasked and unanswered in many Christian circles today.

Pragmatism, however, is not the only temptation that churches face today. As noted earlier, certain corners of evangelicalism have shifted away from staunch doctrinal stances. They have instead accommodated postmodernism and have moved from teaching the absolute truths of Scripture. They give great weight to personal experience and emphasize that as the world has changed, so the church and the church's gospel must change. They consider those who profess belief in absolute truth and morality to be "judgmental," the worst sin of all in a postmodern world. Leading progressive thinkers like Brian McLaren sound this horn, while figures like D. A. Carson, Kevin DeYoung, and Ted Kluck have countered this

new way of thinking. The postmodern wing of the evangelical church is notoriously hard to pin down, but it presents a threat to the health of the church today, just as pragmatism does.

An Undeveloped Christian Mind

These trends have not had only macro-level effects. On the ground level, many Christians have an undeveloped Christian mind and a largely untouched life. The church, not the academy or any other institution, is responsible for the spiritual development of the people of God. David Wells drives to the root of this problem in his cultural analysis, arguing in a number of places that the modern church has imbibed the spirit of modern culture, which is intellectually fragmented, market-driven, style-based, personality-driven, and morally relativistic. He contends that:

[C]ONSUMER SOCIETY PRODUCES only brief, fleeting connections and no bonding in the melting pot. The more descriptive image of the postmodern experience would be not the melting pot but the cocktail party. This is the place of brief encounter where those who may be strangers perform the ritual of instant, but evaporating community, one that springs into being as the sun sets and is gone before the moon arises. The modern self, as a result, has grown very thin, insubstantial, and distracted. It lives in a world of fleeting experiences and constantly shifting images, images

which we create and by which we sometimes even pass ourselves off as something we are not. In this world of images and shadows, the only constant is not the self behind them, or the self consuming them, but the corporations which create and exploit them. (*Above All Earthly Pow'rs*, 45)

Wells's elegant imagery does not obscure the heft of his thought. In a consumerist world where advertising reigns and ethical and spiritual ideas must kneel in the presence of the almighty market, we have become "insubstantial" people with "thin" selves. In other words, we are not deeply rooted in any sense. Oftentimes, we don't think profoundly; we don't connect meaningfully; we don't focus extendedly. We can all too easily flit through life, trying new experiences, inventing new selves through online media. We watch endless amounts of television, keep a constant vigil over our email accounts, and update 800 of our closest friends when we make a piece of toast, but we often cannot be bothered to read, or think, or delve into the lives of unbelievers who are everywhere around us. We have focused on ourselves, pumping ourselves up through self-esteem exercises, redefining our sins as "tendencies" that require therapy of one kind or another, and discarding traditional marks of maturity to gratify desires we refuse to tame. In the process, we have not grown. We have shrunk.

God, it seems, has shrunk with us. So says Wells, noting that in our society:

GOD IS MUCH FRIENDLIER, too. Gone are the notes of judgment, though these are more displaced than denied, and they are replaced by those of love and acceptance. . . . Sin is preached but is presented more in terms of how it “harms the individual, rather than how it offends a holy God. Sin, in short, prevents us from realizing our full potential.” Conversion is insisted upon but then, paradoxically, it is the this-worldly benefits that are accentuated, the practical benefits of knowing Christ receiving all the attention with scarcely a look at what happens if we turn away from him. (*Above All Earthly Pow’rs*, 306)

Here is the ultimate mark of our decline. Because the church has largely lost its theological orientation in the wake of the Enlightenment and the ascendancy of a consumer culture, we have, perhaps unwittingly, redefined our God and what it means to know Him. He is a preference, a choice, who when we convert bestows upon us what we’ve always deserved. With little grip on a biblical understanding of the Almighty, we who are called to be shaped in His holy image have done the reverse: we have shaped Him in our image. As a result, He looks a lot like us.

The Untouched Lives of Many Professing Christians

We have looked into the life and thought of the contemporary evangelical church in this brief little chapter. We have

found reasons for discouragement in numerous places—in the way evangelicals live, in the testimony given by their children, in the sway pragmatism and postmodernism hold in church life. The church, created by God to represent His holiness in this world, has instead accommodated the culture, adopting in many cases its practices, concerns, and even ideologies. In too many of our churches, Christians do not live or think differently from the world. Many may simply be struggling as all who follow Christ in a sinful world do. But the combined weight of this testimony should lead us to consider another possibility: a sizeable portion of Christians are nominal believers, people who profess faith in Christ but who do not truly know the Lord.

We know from Scripture that until Christ returns, the church will be imperfect. It will have some “wheat”—some true believers—and some “tares”—those who falsely profess faith (see Matthew 13). At the same time, we must also know that the church can grow strong or wax weak depending on its love for the Lord and His Word. In some eras, the church thrives; in others, it weakens. In our age, we need to identify the significant challenges and temptations before us in order that we might glorify God and thrive.

There are Christian movements, churches, and leaders that give us great hope. We should support these works of God and take much encouragement from them. Though we do believe that nominalism affects every church in some way, it does not affect all churches to the same extent. We would not desire for churches and Christians to embrace a posture

of needless fear or anxiety. Many churches in this era are recognizing the importance of church membership and doctrinal discipleship. Where these biblical practices are celebrated and where, in general, the Word is faithfully preached and accountability and togetherness are pursued, we should expect to find health, and encouragement, and the sweet savor of God's glory.

But we must not be naïve. As we will see, Edwards's own example shows us that biblical preaching and zeal for the gospel cannot guarantee church health. We face even greater challenges in our day. It is clear that the culture is increasingly moving away from Christian belief. The academy, the media, and the entertainment world challenge Christian faith on intellectual, spiritual, and moral fronts. Pragmatism lures us with promises of vast size and huge budgets. Postmodernism suggests we lay down our absolute truth and morality. Everywhere we are urged to esteem ourselves and make God smaller, the greatest sin of all. Churches and Christians of all kinds are confronted by these problems. Sadly, many who give in on these fronts and suffer from weak faith and weak morality may not merely struggle in their faith. They may have none at all.

We do not have an easy road before us, as Israel's history and the church's past teach us. In the next chapter, we will find abundant proof that even a theological titan like Jonathan Edwards, living in a time and place amenable to biblical Christianity, struggled mightily to counter nominal faith. As we learn from his heroic example in successive chapters, we

will discover how we can respond to our present situation and stand for true Christianity in this fallen world.



Embracing True Christianity

The Need for Evangelical Self-Examination in Our Denominations and Churches

The problem of nominalism described above requires that we adopt a spirit of humility and self-examination before the Lord. Church history abundantly testifies to the idea that nominalism is a problem that all churches and denominations face. Some circumstances may expedite the spread of these problems, and others may more effectively fight them, but all Christians and churches would do well to put down pride and address this challenge with sobriety and confidence in a sovereign God. We cannot take refuge in membership rolls, especially when in seemingly booming denominations, experts suggest that perhaps half of the many millions of members on church rolls rarely set foot in a church building, let alone exercise vibrant faith.

Beyond our denominations, we cannot look around our churches and assume that attendees know the Lord because they belong to the church or attend it faithfully. To put this more simply, just because someone raises their hand in a time of singing doesn't mean that they are a Christian. Just because

someone smiles when greeted, gives generously to the church, and signs up to help in various programs does not mean that they are a Christian. Just because someone has said they are a Christian does not mean that they are. All of the above may sound tough, but we must confront hard realities in a time of great challenge for the church.

We need to be very careful about thinking that a Christian necessarily looks and acts a certain way. We must constantly keep in mind that however healthy our particular congregation, there is no church, no style of worship, no creed one recites that can in itself ensure the conversion of a sinner. Recognizing this fact alone can help us begin to examine our churches and denominations.

The Need for Sober Evangelical Self-Examination in Our Families

One of the scariest things about the data presented above is the sad state of the spiritual lives of many children who have grown up in sound churches. The inability of many children from Christian families to articulate even the simplest biblical truths—who God is and what saving faith is, for starters—shows that many of us have fallen short in our efforts to instill a biblical way of thinking and living in our children. We cannot, of course, save our children by our efforts, but the Bible makes very clear that parental training greatly affects the spiritual lives of our offspring (Proverbs 22:6).

Contrary to our event-centered, leader-oriented, excite-

ment-driven view of childhood training, the Bible seems to suggest that children learn best about true faith in the simple, mundane things of life, in watching parents honor God in the midst of the normal rhythms of everyday life (Deuteronomy 6:7). Though parents may feel inadequate to teach and train, they can take great comfort in knowing that an authentic witness, coupled by sound instruction, has great power. The lives of countless believers raised by godly parents testify to this reality. Though they may buttress our parenting, we do not *need* flashy children's programs or charismatic youth speakers. We need to be godly parents whose lives back up our faith.