

Jonathan Edwards – Preacher & Theologian

His Early Life:

- 1) Jonathan Edwards was born on October 5, 1703 in East Windsor, Connecticut. His father was Timothy Edwards who was the pastor of a local Congregational Church in East Windsor. His mother was Esther Stoddard, the daughter of Solomon Stoddard, pastor of the Congregational Church in Northampton, Massachusetts where Jonathan would one day be the pastor. She was known as a woman that possessed a “queenly presence and admirable character”. The Lord blessed Timothy and Esther with eleven children, all of whom were daughters with the exception of Jonathan, who was their fifth child.
- 2) Jonathan grew up in an atmosphere of Puritan piety, learning and affection. He was mainly schooled at home by his father and four older sisters, all of whom had received an excellent education themselves (his father graduated from Harvard with honors in 1691). His childhood education immersed him in the study of the Bible and Christian theology as well as the classics and ancient languages. He began studying Latin at the age of six and by the age of thirteen he had acquired a good knowledge of Latin, Hebrew and Greek. He was taught to think with a pen in his hand and thus he learned at an early age to think definitely and to express his thoughts clearly. At the age of nine he wrote a brief paper on the nature of souls. At the age of eleven he wrote about the subject of revival and later wrote a famous essay on the habits of the “flying spider” which became a pioneer work in the history of American natural science. These essays displayed that Edwards possessed a remarkable gift of observation and analysis.
- 3) In the fall of 1716, just prior to his thirteenth birthday, Edwards entered the Collegiate School of Connecticut (Yale University) and graduated in September of 1720 as valedictorian with the highest honors in his class. Following graduation, he then went to New Haven to complete his graduate studies and spent two years studying theology.
- 4) Throughout his early years, Edwards had been an eager seeker of salvation but did not have full assurance of his right relationship with God until his final year in college. It was while meditating one day on the words of 1 Timothy 1:17 that says, “Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen”, that there came into his soul “a sense of the glory of the Divine Being”. He thought, “How excellent a Being that was, and how happy I would be if I might enjoy that God, and be rapt up to him in heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in Him forever.” Prior to this, Edwards struggled for many years with the truths of God’s absolute sovereignty, but now they were to him “exceedingly pleasant, bright and sweet”. On January 12, 1723, Edwards entered into his diary the following words, “I made salvation the main business of my life”, and resolved “Never to do any manner of things, whether in soul or body, less, but what tends to the glory of God.”
- 5) Following graduation, Edwards filled the pulpit for a Presbyterian Church in New York City for an eight month period (August of 1722 to April of 1723). The church invited him to remain, but he declined the call. Instead, he returned to Yale as a tutor and remained there until September of 1726. On February 14, 1727 he was ordained minister of the Congregational Church at Northampton and assistant to his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard.
- 6) On July 28, 1727, Jonathan married Sarah Pierrepont of New Haven whom he had known since she was thirteen years old. Eleven children were born to them, eight daughters and three sons. It was said of Sarah that she “possessed an unusual degree of tact and sweetness of character, and proved a most valuable helpmate to the young minister.” During their married life she relieved her husband of many burdens, enabling him to pursue his studies with relatively few interruptions.
- 7) On February 11, 1729, his grandfather died, leaving to Edwards the sole ministerial charge of the Northampton congregation.

His Years in Northampton and the Great Awakening:

- 1) Northampton was a small city known for its wealth and culture. It was also a city characterized by crude behavior and immorality. In 1734 Edwards wrote the following as it related to the general state of things in the town – “It seemed to be a time of extraordinary dullness in religion. Licentiousness for some years prevailed among the youth of the town; they were many of them very much addicted to night walking and frequenting the tavern, and lewd practices, wherein some, by their example, exceedingly corrupted others.”

2) In November of 1734, Edwards preached a series of sermons on the subject “Justification by Faith Alone”. As a result, a half dozen people were brought to a saving knowledge of the Lord, including a young woman who had led a notoriously wicked lifestyle. Edwards had not heard of her conversion until she came to his study, and in humility and brokenness, conversed with him about her soul. Word of her conversion spread throughout town, and many people being aware of her reputation, acknowledged that only God could effect such a sudden and marked change in her life. News of Gods working spread through other towns in New England and many were converted. Edwards wrote concerning the revival that took place “To one young woman with whom I had conversation, it appeared that God had given her a new heart, truly broken and sanctified. I could not doubt it. The news of it seemed to be almost like a flash of lightening upon the hearts of young people all over town and upon many others...The one thing in their view was to get the kingdom of heaven, and everyone appeared pressing into it. What persons’ minds were intent upon was to escape for their lives, and to fly from the wrath to come. There was scarcely a single person in the town, young or old, left unconcerned about the great things of the eternal world. Meetings were greatly thronged. The work of conversion increased more and more. Souls did as it were come by flocks to Jesus Christ. Many, who came to town, on one occasion or other, had their consciences smitten or awakened. There were many instances of persons who came on visits or on business, who had not been long here before they partook of that shower of divine blessing which God rained down here, and went home rejoicing, till at length the same work began evidently to appear and prevail in several other towns in the country.” This first revival took place in the winter and spring of 1734 and 1735.

3) The preaching of men like Jonathan Edwards provided the climate for the second awakening in the colonies in 1740 and 1741, which was led by evangelist George Whitfield. It was during this period that on July 8, 1741 Edwards preached his famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” in Enfield, Connecticut. During the previous night, a group of godly women prayed for the Spirit’s visitation upon this meeting, and it came. As people gathered in the meeting place many were shocked by the flippancy of the congregation. As Edwards preached, he stood motionless and used no gestures. His left elbow leaned on the pulpit and his left hand held his notes. His text was Deuteronomy 32:35 – “Their foot shall slide in due time”. His words so gripped the audience that they felt that the doom that he pronounced would fall upon them immediately. It is said that throughout that night in almost every house in Enfield, men and women could be heard crying out to God to save them.

4) It is estimated that during the ministry of Jonathan Edwards, the population of New England was about 300,000 and it is believed that of that number, 60,000 were converted, half of them being previously unconverted church members.

5) Edward’s reputation as a hell-fire preacher is largely undeserved. In the pulpit, he usually spoke quietly and with dignity, though emphatically, and his voice was not particularly suited for speaking to large crowds. When making his points, he never raised his voice or used exaggerated gestures; rather he employed striking imagery and overwhelming Biblical argument in all of his sermons.

6) Edwards pastored the church in Northampton for 23 years until 1750 when the congregation dismissed him from his post because he insisted that only persons who had made a profession of faith should be allowed to partake of the Lord’s Table. Fifty years earlier, Edward’s grandfather had opened up the table to all who wanted to come and because the congregation of Northampton did not want the standing privilege revoked, they voted 230 to 23 in favor of terminating Edwards position in the church, which took place on June 22, 1750. Years later, many of his parishioners wrote him, asking for his forgiveness over what had taken place.

His Final Years:

1) Following his dismissal from Northampton, Edwards was installed as the pastor of a small congregational church in August of 1751 in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. While there, he ministered to the Housatonic Indians through an interpreter.

2) In 1757, Edward’s son-in-law Aaron Burr, who was the president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University), died, and Jonathan was asked to take his place. Though Stockbridge was something of a haven for Edwards, he accepted the new position and was installed on February 16, 1758.

3) One week after his inauguration, he was inoculated with a new small pox vaccine. After the ordinary effects of the inoculation had subsided, a secondary fever unexpectedly caused his health to steadily deteriorate from which he never recovered. Edwards died on March 22, 1758.