

Jonathan Edwards

Portrait of a Revival Preacher

By Leonard Ravenhill

Jonathan Edwards, 1703 - 1758, achieved greatness as an American preacher-evangelist, principal of a college, mystic, and revivalist.

"Jonathan Edwards is not only the greatest of all American theologians and philosophers but the greatest of our pre-19th century writers as well." So writes Randall Stewart in his book *American Literature and Christian Doctrine*.

Here is a concise summary of the life of Edwards from the able pen of Perry Miller: "Jonathan Edwards was one of America's five or six major artists-who happened to work with ideas instead of with poems or novels. He was much more of a psychologist and poet than a logician. Though he devoted his genius to topics derived from the body of divinity (the will, virtue, sin), he traced them in the manner of the very finest spectator. . . ."

For us to see Jonathan Edwards ascend his pulpit today, a candle in one hand and his sermon manuscript in the other, would cause a titter in the congregation. From our modern foam-cushioned church seats, with carpeted aisles and soothing background music, we can scarcely capture the old-time dignity of the unpretentious church where Edwards and others held captive the hearts and minds of their hearers. When Jonathan Edwards "uttered" in the Spirit, the expressionless face, the sonorous voice, the sober clothing were forgotten. He was neither a dullard nor a sluggard. His was a devoted heart intent on rightly dividing the word of truth. But in doing it, Edwards flamed. Yet to him, sensationalism was anathema. To make an impression was never the thought behind any of his preaching. Scholarship on fire for God is to my mind the eighth wonder of the world. Edwards had it.

The tongue of Edwards must have been like a sharp two-edged sword to his attentive hearers. His words must have been as painful to their hearts and consciences as burning metal on flesh. Nevertheless, men gave heed, repented, and were saved.

"Knowing the terror of the Lord" (a thing seemingly forgotten in our day both by pulpit and pew), Edwards smoldered with holy wrath. Impervious to any consequences of such severity, he thundered these words from his pulpit: "The bow of God's wrath is bent, and His arrows made ready upon the string. Justice points the arrow at your heart and strings the bow. It is *nothing but the mere pleasure of God* (and that of an angry God without any promise or obligation at all) that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood."

To utter truth like that with tears and tenderness takes an anointed and therefore fearless and compassionate man.

But in the hearts and minds of the hearers there must also have been some prevenient grace at work. Apart from this, men would have rebelled at this stern sweep of power on their souls. As it was, before Edwards' spiritual hurricane, the crowd collapsed. Some fell to the earth as if pole-axed. Others, with heads bowed, clung onto the posts of the temple as if afraid of falling into the nethermost depths of hell.

Edwards wept as he preached. In this he was a kinsman in soul of the mighty Brownlow North of the revival that occurred years later in Ireland in 1859. The divine law of Psalm 126:6 never has nor ever can be abrogated: "He that goeth forth and *weepeth*, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him."

As pastor of one of New England's largest, wealthiest, and most socially-conscious congregations, Edwards had a rare perception of the needs of his flock. He also had a heart of great tenderness for their spiritual health. Let's go to the woods where Edwards is alone with his God. Let's creep up behind that old gnarled tree and listen to his broken prayer:

"I feel an ardency of soul to be . . . emptied and annihilated, to lie in the dust and be full of Christ alone, to love Him with a holy and pure love, to trust in Him, to live on Him, and to be *perfectly sanctified* and made pure with a divine and heavenly purity."

Edwards was also a soul kinsman of George Whitefield, his contemporary. Was the mighty American, Jonathan Edwards, sparked by the English apostle, Whitefield? Did the thunderings from the vibrant soul of Whitefield, then storming through New England, disturb and challenge the normality of Edwards' preaching life? This is not a rhetorical question. It cannot be answered fully, but it contains more than a grain of truth. We do know that after meeting young George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards changed his style of sermon notes.

It pleased the Lord to sideline Edwards to a small pastorate at Stockbridge, Mass. This banishment came because of his difference with a Mr. Stoddard, who had administered the Lord's Supper to some who had not made public confession of their faith in Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour. But in his seclusion, Edwards' brilliant mind took wings. His long incubated thinking came to the birth. Thus he might have said to Mr. Stoddard what Joseph said to his brethren: "Ye meant evil against me; but God meant it for good." The Lord again turned the wrath of man to praise Him, for at this time Edwards' soul got the measure of "words." From his pen flowed the best of his writings. Edwards sleeps, but his message still speaks.

When the voice of Milton had long been silenced by death, Wordsworth cried,

Milton, thou should'st be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee;
She is a fen of stagnant waters.

We could paraphrase those words thus:
Edwards, thou should'st be living at this hour:
America hath need of thee:
She is a fen (spiritually) of stagnant waters.

A thin crust, a very thin crust of morality, it seems to me, keeps America from complete collapse. In this perilous hour we need a whole generation of preachers like Edward

"O Lord of hosts, turn us again; cause Thy face to shine upon us, and we shall be saved."

Contrast this great man of God with his contemporary. I quote from Al Sanders in *Crisis in Morality!*

"Max Jukes, the atheist, lived a godless life. He married an ungodly girl, and from the union there were 310 who died as paupers, 150 were criminals, 7 were murderers, 100 were drunkards, and more than half of the women were prostitutes. His 540 descendants cost the State one and a quarter million dollars.

"But, praise the Lord, it works both ways! There is a record of a great American man of God, Jonathan Edwards. He lived at the same time as Max Jukes, but he married a godly girl. An investigation was made of 1,394 known descendants of Jonathan Edwards of which 13 became college presidents, 65 college professors, 3 United States senators, 30 judges, 100 lawyers, 60 physicians, 75 army and navy officers, 100 preachers and missionaries, 60 authors of prominence, one a vice-president of the United States, 80 became public officials in other capacities, 295 college graduates, among whom were governors of states and ministers to foreign countries. His descendants did not cost the state a single penny. 'The memory of the just is blessed' (Prov. 10:7)."

To us this is the conclusion of the whole matter.
