



Jonathan Edwards (1703-58)

Why should we study the life of Jonathan Edwards? What was special about him? Arguably Edwards was America's greatest theologian, greatest philosopher and one of its greatest preachers. The most famous sermon ever preached in America is entitled, 'Sinners in the hands of an angry God' and was preached by him at Enfield on 8th July 1741. It marked the beginning of revival in that town, and many were awakened and converted as God's Spirit came down in power on the congregation that day. Others were blessed when the sermon appeared in print and still today souls are being saved through it. Two or three years ago I met a young man who told me that he was converted at university where he was studying eighteenth century American literature. Among other works the class was asked to read was this sermon of Edwards, no doubt the intention being to poke fun at the 'fire and brimstone preaching'. It was the means God used to convict him of his sin and bring him to repentance.

His Books

Edwards, growing up in the manse of a godly minister in New England, was steeped in the Puritan theology of the seventeenth century but he also drew on what was best in the Enlightenment thinking of the eighteenth century. He was in close contact with Scottish theologians and preachers such as McCulloch, Robe, Erskine and M'Laurin. He was a friend of George Whitefield the great open-air evangelist. In Edwards were combined the deep thinker, the accomplished scholar, the zealous, evangelistic preacher and the earnest, holy man of God.

Dr D Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who in many ways was the most influential Reformed theologian and preacher of the last century, spoke of the huge impact the discovery of a dusty old set of the *Works of Edwards* in 1929 in a Cardiff bookshop had upon him. For the rest of his life he drew on the treasures and the fire to be found in these volumes. But it's not just evangelicals who have been fascinated by Edwards. Yale University Press began a massive project in 1957 to edit carefully all Edwards' books which had already been published and also to publish for the first time all his notebooks, sermons and writings which had survived. *The Freedom of the Will* appeared in 1957 and in 2008 the final volume, Volume 26, entitled *A Catalogue of Books*. This work provides an immense resource for the Christian church from one to whom God gave great insight into His Word. Many biographies and other works have been written on Edwards and his thought. The Rev Iain H Murray provides us with a typically-readable and edifying biography published by the Banner of Truth Trust. A large, scholarly and carefully researched biography has been produced more recently by George Marsden, published by Yale Press. It is largely sympathetic and also very readable.

Birth

Edwards was born in East Windsor manse, Connecticut, New England in 1703, incidentally the same year as John Wesley the founder of the Methodists. His father Timothy was also a gifted theologian and saw much blessing on his ministry, with several revivals taking place in his parish. His mother, Esther Stoddard, was the daughter of Solomon Stoddard the longtime minister of Northampton and highly-respected patriarch of Massachusetts. She herself was a talented and godly woman. After her husband's death it is said that local women used to gather in her home in an afternoon to hear her read and expound the Scriptures. Jonathan was the only son but he had ten sisters, all of whom survived to adulthood. They were all six feet tall and folk spoke of Timothy Edwards with his sixty feet of daughters! Jonathan was a precocious child and was taught by his father. He entered Yale College at the early age of twelve and by the age of thirteen was reckoned

to have a good grasp of Latin, Greek and Hebrew. He graduated with a BA in 1720 while still only 16 and spent a further year studying for an MA (although he did not graduate till 1723).

Conversion

When Jonathan was nine God's mighty power in revival came upon East Windsor. He was awakened to a concern of soul. Along with his friends he built a den in a swamp where the boys gathered to pray. It would have been wonderful to have been a fly on the wall watching and listening. However after a while the revival passed and the effect wore off and they began to use the den for games of fighting Indians. Another revival came when he was twelve and again he was deeply moved but in time the effect of this one also passed. At the age of sixteen he became seriously ill with pleurisy. He stated how he felt himself shaken over the very pit of hell. For the next year or so the conviction of sin remained though with varying intensity. He described himself as a *'miserable seeker'*. One day while contemplating the words: *'Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen'* (1 Tim. 1:17), the light broke through. His heart was filled with wonder, love, joy and assurance. He told his father about it. From now on his first and greatest resolution was to do everything he did to the glory of God. His prolonged seeking and his depth of conviction of sin meant that when peace came it was all the richer. He knew God, feared Him and was caught up with His glory. He was seventeen at the time.

The Ministry

Licensed to preach when still only eighteen he went as a supply preacher to New York in August 1722. He lodged with a widow Mrs Smith and greatly enjoyed fellowship with her and her son John. A group had broken away from the main congregation and following his eight months preaching there they decided to return to the main body. In this sense he did himself out of a job but it was a happy outcome with which he was delighted. He was very happy in New York and much appreciated by the congregation. Following this he became minister in Bolton, a small town near his home in Connecticut. He does not seem to have been very happy here and so when a call came to him to be a tutor in Yale College he accepted. He remained in Yale two years.

Northampton

In 1726 while he was still only 23 years of age he received a call to assist his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, who was the minister of the large and important congregation of Northampton. Stoddard had been pastor of the congregation for almost sixty years. He had seen many revivals, was a mighty, gospel preacher and an able theologian and was greatly revered by the people of Northampton and, indeed, the whole region. In 1729 Stoddard died and so he became full pastor of this influential church. Sabbath attendances were well in excess of 1000.

Marriage

The year after his induction Edwards married Sarah Pierpont, a minister's daughter from New Haven. He had first noticed her when she was only thirteen and had noted in his diary that she was a specially godly young lady. When they married she was seventeen and he twenty-four. They had eight daughters and three sons. Jonathan normally rose between four and five in the morning. He spent usually thirteen hours in the study daily. Sarah was an amazingly capable and dedicated wife. She was the one who managed the household which often resembled a small hotel. People passing through the area would stay overnight or for several nights. Students came to study under Edwards and they too stayed for prolonged periods in the manse. They had several servants including a black slave. This was considered normal and acceptable at the time. Sarah also managed the farm which provided a supplementary income. The buying and selling of cattle, sheep and horses and the planting of the fields was supervised by her. Her husband left everything in her capable hands and she was very much the virtuous woman of Proverbs chapter 31. She saw her role as doing everything in her power to ensure that her husband spent the maximum time in prayer and the work of the ministry. She herself had some wonderful experiences of God. In the

evening after dinner Jonathan would relax with the family and friends in the parlour and family worship would be held. The day was brought to a close with Sarah and himself in the study reviewing the day, meditating on the Scriptures and praying together. Theirs was a happy and harmonious marriage and home.

Personal Life and Ministry

Edwards did little in the way of pastoral visiting unless he was specially requested say to visit someone who was dying. His practice was to see people requesting help, in his study. In times of revival many came and queues would form at the study door. He saw his gifts as being in the area of studying, writing and preaching. He was somewhat shy though he could be good company when relaxed among friends. He was a highly disciplined individual with a great sense of purpose in his life. He ate and slept as little as possible in order to devote all his energy and time to his work, but this in turn left him open to serious illnesses which affected him at various times. He seems to have also been particularly prone to headaches. For exercise he would chop wood for half an hour or ride out into the woods a couple of miles where he would spend time in meditation and prayer. When out of the study if a significant thought occurred to him he would pin a small piece of paper to his clothes to remind him when he got home to record the thought. He kept notebooks in which he recorded all his insights. There were different notebooks for different topics and these later became the basis of many of his books. He was a godly man and his devotional exercises were very important to him. He spent much time in the study in prayer and meditation on the Scriptures. Also from time to time he kept special days of humiliation, fasting and prayer.

Revival

In 1734-35 God visited Northampton with a great revival. New power accompanied the preaching. The Lord's people long for preaching with power, and here it was at last. God became the great reality to all. The fear of God came down on the community. All frivolity was abandoned. The taverns were forsaken. The church was crowded at all services. Men and women were convicted of their sin and prayed earnestly to the Lord for mercy. Everyone was talking about the things of eternity. Sinners rejoiced in finding the Saviour. The impact was enormous. Edwards thought that virtually everyone in the town had been converted (later sadly he had to revise his judgment). He wrote a book, describing much of what happened, entitled, *A Narrative of Surprising Conversions*, and this caught the attention of many in Britain. It is a wonderful book telling of the great things God had done and stirred up the Lord's people on both sides of the Atlantic to cry to God for a universal outpouring of His Spirit. From now on Edwards was a household name among the godly.

The Northampton church building was showing signs of its age and work began on a new building and not before time. The winter of 1737 was particularly harsh with severe frost which caused the foundations to shift. While he was preaching one Sunday the galleries collapsed amongst terrible screams from those below. It was thought that many must have been killed but amazingly no one was seriously injured. Edwards sought to make use of this amazing providence to exhort his congregation to give heed to this warning voice from God and stressed the duty of repentance. Life is uncertain. Prepare to meet your God!

Great Awakening

The Great Awakening of 1740-41 was a much more extensive revival. It affected all the American Colonies but also Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England. George Whitefield played a prominent part though the revival was already in New England before he arrived. One characteristic which made it different from previous revivals was that some ministers itinerated from place to place preaching with power. People crowded to the churches where services were held. They would travel great distances to hear the Word. The greatest of sinners were marvellously converted.

Controversies

Wherever the work of God is going on the work of the devil is sure to be there too. In the early church it was a time of revival, great blessings were coming from God and many were being added to the church daily. Yet we read of troubles. The Galatians, who would have taken out their eyes to give to Paul, turned against him. He had planted the church in Corinth and saw himself as a father to the flock and yet they too turned away to false apostles. He had to say sorrowfully to Timothy, *'All they which are in Asia be turned away from me'* (2 Tim. 1:15). Edwards experienced his own share of this grief.

Extremism in Revival

Some of the younger ministers caught up in the excitement of the revival went to extremes and did much harm. They held meetings till late at night, encouraged emotionalism and stirred up those who were already excited. They severely criticised those who were in any way cautious about aspects of the revival, indeed going the length of calling such ministers unconverted and telling their congregations to leave such 'unspiritual' men. Some separatist churches were set up disturbing the harmony and order which had for long existed in New England. James Davenport was the most extreme of these young ministers. It would seem that he became mentally unbalanced. He held bonfires for the burning of 'worldly clothes' (including his own breeches), jewellery and books. Amongst the books burned were a set of Flavel the great Puritan divine. Charles Chauncy an intellectually gifted Boston minister and contemporary of Edwards wrote against the revival dismissing it because of these extremes. Edwards sought to defend the revival as essentially good though he did acknowledge the faults. There was a prolonged controversy. Chauncy stressed the primacy of the intellect over the emotions. Faith he saw as essentially an assent of the mind. Edwards argued that the emotions were also involved in true saving faith. Conversion, where it is genuine, affects the whole man. Davenport and those like him did much harm in dividing the churches and provoking opposition to the revival. Thankfully he later saw his error and repented of it but the damage was done. Those like Chauncy who opposed the revival were known as the 'Old Lights' and those like Edwards as the 'New Lights'. Many of the Old Light party eventually became Unitarian (rejecting the Trinity and atonement).

'Young People's Bible' Controversy

It is amazing how quickly the solemnising effects of a revival can wear off. In 1744, just two years after the revival Edwards learned of several young men who had found a book on medicine and midwifery and were passing it around quoting some of the material in a lewd joking way and also taunting some young women. Blasphemously they called this book the *'Young People's Bible'*. Up to twenty unmarried young men were involved (all in their twenties) and all but three were members of the church. Sadly they had been immorally entertaining themselves with this book for the past five years. Edwards was deeply troubled. He felt a personal sense of shame and disgrace and particularly because his church had been held up as an example of the wonderful things God had done. An attempt should have been made to deal with the matter privately and pastorally. Instead Edwards, in a fateful mistake, read out from the pulpit the names of some of the accused and of witnesses who were asked to report to the manse. He had not made plain who were accused of guilt and who were the witnesses. Some on the list belonged to influential families. The town was soon in an uproar. Noting this, some of the young men treated the minister and those involved in the investigation with contempt. Eventually the young men apologised but the damage was done. After this Edwards' relationship with the young was never the same. Indeed his relationship with the whole congregation was spoiled.

Communion Controversy

Solomon Stoddard had encouraged all church attenders to take communion even if they were not converted. He saw communion as a converting ordinance. As long as people were morally upright and sound in their understanding of the faith he argued that they could benefit from partaking in the Lord's Supper. Timothy Edwards, Jonathan's father, had written against this. To begin with, Jonathan accepted this practice, but as time passed he became increasingly uneasy with it and

especially so after the 'Young People's Bible' controversy. He wrote against it and wanted to preach against it but there was huge opposition. Some of them felt it was a direct attack on the memory of their old, beloved minister. Some members of the Stoddard clan became intensely involved. William Williams, the minister of Hatfield was married to a daughter of Stoddard (Christian). He was a great admirer of Edwards, but when he died his family mostly became bitter opponents of Edwards, though they were his cousins. The end result of the controversy was that the congregation voted to dismiss Edwards from the charge. To us it appears shocking that such a godly, gifted minister, and one who was used in the conversion of many of those who turned against him, should suffer in this way.

Mission to the Indians

Edwards' dismissal from Northampton left him perplexed as to where he should now go. It was a time of great financial stress for him. His friends in Scotland invited him over assuring him that he would have a good following and could get a congregation. While he said he would have no difficulty signing the *Westminster Confession of Faith* he found it hard to envisage uprooting his large family to cross the Atlantic. However he did not totally dismiss the proposal. He continued to give supply in Northampton when there was no one else around to preach. His enemies, though, were unhappy and eventually got a decision passed that if there was no preacher there would be no service even if Edwards was available. In 1751, on the death of John Sergeant, who was a missionary to the Indians in the frontier town of Stockbridge, he received a call there. It seemed a strange choice, the great theologian called to work in a small Indian mission station. However he laboured to preach as simply as possible and saw numbers of them professing salvation. Even here in this little town he was not away from strife. Ephraim Williams, the brother of William Williams, was the local squire. Several of his family caused problems and tried to undermine Edwards' position. Eventually some peace was attained. Here in a quiet backwater he had time to write some of his great books, *Freedom of the Will*, *Original Sin* and the *Nature of True Virtue*.

Princeton

Aaron Burr, who was married to Edwards' daughter Esther, was president of the College of New Jersey which during his time moved to the small town of Princeton and eventually became Princeton University. Burr died suddenly in 1757 (aged 42) and the trustees elected Edwards to be his successor. Edwards was reluctant to go as he had a number of books which he planned to write and feared that he would be too busy in Princeton. He called a local council of ministers and asked their advice. Their decision was that he should go, so, with tears, in February 1758 he moved to Princeton. Within a month, on the 22nd of March he was dead. He and his family had taken a smallpox inoculation and in his case it went wrong. An infection broke out in his mouth and throat, preventing him eating and drinking. His father had died at the ripe old age of 89 just two months before. Sadly his daughter Esther died two weeks after himself leaving two young orphans. Jonathan's wife Sarah, whom he had left in Stockbridge looking after the family till he had settled in Princeton, came later in the summer to collect the two children but she died of dysentery (2nd October).

Deathbed

Edwards' daughter Lucy was with him in Princeton when the end came. He called her and said:

'Dear Lucy, it seems to me to be the will of God that I must shortly leave you; therefore give my kindest love to my dear wife, and tell her, that the uncommon union, which has so long subsisted between us, has been of such a nature, as I trust is spiritual, and therefore will continue forever. And I hope she will be supported in so great a trial and submit cheerfully to the will of God. And as to my children, you are now like to be left fatherless, which I hope will be an inducement to you all, to seek the Father who will never fail you'. Shortly after this looking around he said, 'Now where is Jesus of Nazareth my never-failing Friend'.

When those who were around his bedside thought that he was unconscious, they expressed their sorrow at what his loss would mean to the College and to the church at large, but he surprised them by uttering a final sentence, *'Trust God and you need not fear'*. How true and what wonderful words with which to close a life of proclamation of the Gospel!

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