

An Introduction to Jonathan Edwards

By Bret Hicks

November 22, 2008

A Brief Biography of Jonathan Edwards

1703 Jonathan Edwards born in East Windsor, Connecticut on October 5.

1716 Admitted to Yale

1720 Graduates from Yale (as valedictorian) and studies there for the ministry

1721 Edwards begins to have intense religious experiences.

1722 Serves as pastor of a New York Presbyterian church for eight months

1723 Edwards writes about Sarah Pierrepont, his future wife

They say there is a young lady in [New Haven] who is beloved of that almighty Being, who made and rules the world, and that there are certain seasons in which this great Being, in some way or other invisible, comes to her and fills her mind with exceeding sweet delight, and that she hardly cares for anything, except to meditate on him--that she expects after a while to be received up where he is, to be raised up out of the world and caught up into heaven; being assured that he loves her too well to let her remain at a distance from him always. There she is to dwell with him, and to be ravished with his love and delight forever. Therefore, if you present all the world before her, with the richest of its treasures, she disregards it and cares not for it, and is unmindful of any pain or affliction. She has a strange sweetness in her mind, and singular purity in her affections; is most just and conscientious in all her actions; and you could not persuade her to do anything wrong or sinful, if you would give her all the world, lest she should offend this great Being. She is of a wonderful sweetness, calmness and universal benevolence of mind; especially after those seasons in which this great God has manifested himself to her mind. She will sometimes go about from place to place, singing sweetly; and seems to be always full of joy and pleasure; and no one knows for what. She loves to be alone, and to wander in the fields and on the mountains, and seems to have someone invisible always conversing with her.

1724 Elected a tutor at Yale

1726 Called to Northampton church as assistant minister to grandfather Solomon Stoddard

1727 Marriage to Sarah Pierrepont

1729 Death of Solomon Stoddard

1731 Delivers Public Lecture at First Church, Boston

1734 Beginning of Great Awakening in Northampton

1737 Edwards publishes *A Narrative of Surprising Conversions*. The preface is written by the famous hymnwriter Isaac Watts, and the work brings international attention to the Great Awakening and to Edwards.

1740 Whitefield briefly joins Edwards in revival preaching during the height of the Great Awakening.

1741 Preaches sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" at Enfield, Connecticut on July 8.

1741 Edwards publishes *Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*, which gives an outline of how to judge a move of God's Spirit, and serves as a defense of the Great Awakening.

1742 Sarah Edwards has an intense spiritual experience which lasted about two weeks, and which almost left her physically overwhelmed. However, even during this experience, she continues to carry out her regular duties in the house and church. Edwards sees all of this as a prime example of the Awakening, and reports the experience in *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion*.

1742 Writes *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion*

1746 Writes *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*

1747 Death of David Brainerd at Edwards' home. Edwards biography of Brainerd is used by God to spark many to an increased love of God and an interest in missions to the unreached.

1748 Beginning of dissension in Edwards' church. The seeds of this were due to Edwards' handling of some sinful behavior on the part of some young people within the congregation.

1750 Farewell Sermon at Northampton. Although the formal reason given was over a disagreement about the nature of the Lords Supper and its proper recipients, the real seeds were due to the problems which arose from the way Edwards handled the sinful conduct of the young people in 1748.

1751 Settles in Stockbridge as pastor to settlers and missionary to Indians. During this time he will write many of his great philosophical works.

1754 Writes *Freedom of the Will*, a defense of the doctrine of total depravity and the sovereignty of God in salvation.

1755 Writes *Nature of True Virtue* and *The End for Which God Created the World*

1757 Chosen president of College of New Jersey (Princeton)

1758 Inaugurated president at Princeton

1758 Finished *Original Sin*, which was being printed as Edwards lay dying of smallpox.

1758 Dies on March 22 of smallpox resulting from a smallpox inoculation.

1765 Samuel Hopkins, a disciple of Edwards, publishes *Nature of True Virtue* and *The End for Which God Created the World*.

A Brief Annotated Bibliography for Further Study on Jonathan Edwards

Writings by Jonathan Edwards

Edwards, Jonathan. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, 2 vols.* Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998; reprint of 1834 (Hickman) edition originally published in Great Britain.

This is the best single affordable collection of writings by Jonathan Edwards. All of Edward's major writings and sermons are contained in these volumes, along with his miscellanies, resolutions, and introductory material. The volumes are widely available and reasonably affordable. However, the font size in the volumes is small and can be difficult to read.

_____. ***Jonathan Edwards on Revival (Containing A Narrative of Surprising Conversions; Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God, and An Account of the Revival of Religion in Northampton in 1740-1742).*** Carlisle, Pa: Banner of Truth, 1965.

This is a nice small volume of Edwards' three major writings on revival and awakening. This is a great place to look if you want to understand Edwards' views on the actual nature of revival and awakening, and gives a good history of some examples of what occurred in the Great Awakening. Edwards' views on these subjects are the most thoughtful and balanced I have ever read on the subject, and the modern church desperately needs to understand what he actually thought to help us evaluate supposed revivals and awakenings and outpourings of the Spirit today.

Writings/materials about Jonathan Edwards

Gerstner, John. *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards (taped audio series distributed by the Institute for Theological Studies).* Grand Rapids: Outreach, Inc., 1986.

This is a lecture series (consisting of 25 approximately 45 minute lectures) given by John Gerstner, who was RC Sproul's teacher and mentor, on the life, thought, and ministry of Jonathan Edwards. Before his death, Gerstner was one of the greatest living Edwards scholars. These tapes provide an excellent introduction to Edwards, and formed the core of my early exposure to Edwards writings and thought.

Marsden, George. *Jonathan Edwards: A Life.* New Haven: Yale Press, 2003.

This is now considered by many to be the best single biography on Edwards. Marsden is an excellent historian who is an evangelical. He clearly respects Edwards, but is not afraid to show problems and inconsistencies in Edward's life and thought. This large biography takes a while to read, but is full of great information to help the reader understand Edwards, which in turn can provide greater insight into his writings.

Piper, John. *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards*.
Wheaton: Crossway, 1998.

This book contains an extended introduction to the life and thought of Edwards, including both a brief biography, and a summary of some key ideas arising from Edwards theology. The last half of the book is the text of Edwards' treatise *The End for Which God Created the World*, including very helpful explanatory notes by Piper. John Piper is a modern disciple of Edwards, and much of his thought is a conscious updating of the thought of Edwards. Piper's commentary will help you understand this important, but difficult, writing of Edwards. This is a great way to begin reading Edwards' later, more philosophical, writings.

Materials I Have Written on Jonathan Edwards

All of these papers I wrote for seminary are available to be downloaded on our church website. Simply go to the section for the "Hall of Church History" under the teachings section. The specific links for each paper are also included below.

Asleep in the Light – Why the Modern Church Desperately Needs to Rediscover Jonathan Edwards.

<http://www.bayridgechristianchurch.org/page12/page30/page31/files/85af84f89459a0afb802ecfdcd459677-0.html>

This was a paper I wrote for my seminary class on Jonathan Edwards. It gives my reasons for thinking that Edwards' thought is very important for the situation confronting the modern church. I also give an overview of how I would recommend people begin to read Edwards – which writings and sermons to read first, and which ones to wait until a basic understanding of Edwards has been attained.

The Concept of "Seeking" in the Theology of the Apostle Paul and Jonathan Edwards.

<http://www.bayridgechristianchurch.org/page12/page30/page31/files/fda66173f228cc3316c79c6f47c775a1-1.html>

This was a paper I wrote from my seminary class on Jonathan Edwards. It deals with the specific questions of whether unbelievers can really seek God, and if so, in what sense.

Jonathan Edwards: His Theology of Revival and Awakening.

<http://www.bayridgechristianchurch.org/page12/page30/page31/files/f0f564d64e3cbb75058ffff688acdb67-2.html>

This was a paper I wrote for my seminary class on the Classic Writings for Personal Devotion. In it I try to summarize Edwards' thought on revival and awakening, both personal and corporate. It includes my understanding of Edwards' thought on the relationship between Divine Sovereignty and human responsibility and action in revival and awakening, his views on how to judge if a revival was really a work of the Spirit of God or if it was merely a product of human emotion and activity, and his understanding of how Christians grow in their Christian walk.

Revival: A Comparison of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards and the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship.

<http://www.bayridgechristianchurch.org/page12/page30/page31/files/dd981e86de2963c6c070fb5a9b7a6515-3.html>

This was a paper I wrote for my seminary class on the Church history from the Reformation to the present. In it I had to compare and contrast the thought of Jonathan Edwards and the leaders of the “Toronto Blessing” on revival. I discuss the theology of each on the Divine Sovereignty and human responsibility/action in bringing about and sustaining revival. I also address the theologies on the subject of unusual physical manifestations during a revival. If you would like to understand how Edwards would probably have viewed several modern purported revivals, this is my understanding from his writings.