

Life and Legacy of Jonathan Edwards

by Jeff Riddle

Jonathan Edwards' life and legacy are a testament to his commitment to spiritual growth, discipline, and a deeper understanding of God, which ultimately led to the Great Awakening in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Duration: 51:18

Scripture: Deuteronomy 32:35, Matthew 25:31

Topics: "Evangelism", "Revival"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker introduces a four-part series on evangelism and evangelists. He discusses the lives and ministries of four men who lived in the last 300 years. The speaker emphasizes the importance of understanding our need for salvation and the cure for our sin. He highlights the preaching style of Jonathan Edwards, who focused on the holiness and justice of God, leading people to understand their sin and the need for grace. Edwards' preaching resulted in a powerful revival, with many people being converted and seeking salvation.

Transcript

Alright, tonight we're beginning a series, a four-part series, that I'm calling Evangelism and Evangelists. And over the next several weeks, we're going to be looking at the lives and ministries of four men whose lives roughly cover the last 300 years. And if we took these men, you're going to see the overlap sort of in their death dates and birth dates.

If we were to line these men up and they were to hold hands through the centuries, just four men's lives, and we're back to the year 1700. And three of these guys we're going to look at are Americans. One is British, but all were international figures who had a worldwide impact on the cause of Christ and upon the churches of the world.

Now, we're going to learn from these men and understand how their ideas about evangelism, about what it means to share the gospel and their ideas about revival, what it means for God to move and there to be an awakening among God's people spiritually, what their ideas about that have meant for those of us who are in this generation. And in fact, particularly the next time when we talk about Charles Finney, we're going to find that many things that we do in church today are the direct result of some things that were done 200 years ago in frontier revivalism that was led by the new measures of Charles Finney. But we're going even further back tonight to the man who was integral in the first great awakening in America.

We're not profiling these men because we think that everything about their ministries was exemplary. In fact, in a few cases, we'll see that I'm going to suggest that there were things that were very harmful that were suggested, particularly with Finney and things that we need to avoid and things that we need to correct. But we do also want to recognize again that that God has moved in the past, in days past to produce revivals and spiritual awakenings.

I know we have a we've had a revival meeting or we call them renewal meetings or Bible conferences in our church. And it used to be the tradition some years ago. Maybe you were part of a church where you had a revival every year and you would schedule on the calendar.

This is the weekend we're going to have a revival. And the question is, can you do that? Can you anticipate or can you do anything that will promote or encourage a revival? Or is it something necessarily that God has to bring suddenly and unexpectedly upon a people? So tonight we're beginning with Jonathan Edwards, and I'm using some different sources. There was an excellent biography of Jonathan Edwards.

It was printed in 2003. That was the 300th anniversary of his birth, written by George Marsden. He's probably the preeminent American historian of American Christianity.

He teaches at Notre Dame, even though he's a Protestant. And I'm also profited from listening to a fellow named Michael Hagen, who is a Canadian Baptist, teaches up in Toronto and has some good audio files on Sermon Audio about various things, including the life of Edwards. Edwards, Jonathan Edwards, was generally known as the greatest American theologian, the greatest evangelical American theologian.

He was a pastor, a missionary, a writing theologian, and a college president. Some have called him the theologian of revivals. He was used of God to ignite and to fan into flame what is called the first great awakening in the New England colonies, where by some estimates, as much as one-seventh of the population, 50,000 men and women and children were converted within just a couple of years.

And so it's appropriate that we begin with Edwards. And we might add that in recent years, there's been a revival of interest in Jonathan Edwards among pastors and scholars. If you like John Piper, some people said John Piper just takes Jonathan Edwards and contemporizes it or he popularizes what Jonathan Edwards wrote about 300 years ago.

By the way, I don't consider myself to be an expert on Edwards. There are pastors who do nothing but read him and have tried to read everything they could possibly get their hands on. I don't consider myself an expert on him.

I consider myself more like a beginning student of his life and works. The first thing I want to do is I want to give just a sketch of his life, a biography of his life. And then I want to go back and ask what were some of the things that he contributed to evangelical Christianity that remain with us today.

So let me just begin with a sketch of his life. And I think this is always a good discipline for Christians, by the way. If we're saying what should a Christian read? We should read the Bible first and foremost.

We should read doctrine and theology. We should read practical works on prayer and on discipleship. But I think one of the most profitable things that we can do as Christians is read Christian biography.

Read the life stories of the saints of the past. Put that in as part of your diet of what you're reading. And it's very profitable to look at what other men and other women have done, how they've lived their lives, the decisions they've made, how God blessed that or did not bless that.

And to learn from it. Jonathan Edwards was born in 1703 in East Windsor, Connecticut. This is a town that was on the Connecticut River.

And it was in those days in 1703. It was a frontier outpost of the British colonies. Edwards would not have probably thought of himself as an American.

He would have thought of himself as a British subject. It was the wilderness. It was the outer edges.

People were still afraid of Indian attacks. It was to be really in the hinterland as far as the world goes. His father, Timothy Edwards, was the pastor of the Congregational Church in East Windsor, Connecticut.

His mother, Esther, was the daughter of a man named Solomon Stoddard, who was also a pastor, a well-known pastor of that age. And in fact, her father was called the Pope of the Connecticut Valley. He had a lot of power, a lot of influence in those days.

Churchmen had a lot of influence in the colonies. And Solomon Stoddard had kind of religious power and also civil power. And by the way, Solomon Stoddard, Jonathan Edwards' grandfather, was the pastor of the church at Northampton, Massachusetts, where Edwards would later serve himself as pastor.

It's interesting to read a little bit about the lives of these men. Edwards' grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, was the pastor of the Congregational Church at Northampton, Massachusetts for 60 years. Edwards' father, Timothy Edwards, was the pastor of the church in East Windsor, Connecticut for 63 years.

Can you imagine that? There was a front page article in the paper this week about the pastor of the Episcopal Church in Charlottesville, had been there for 30 years. And they said he was the longest standing tenured minister in town. Can you imagine someone who would be the pastor of the church for 60 years? Came there in his early 20s and stayed until he died in his 80s.

The pulpit committees couldn't get that. They were rusty. They didn't have any practice as a pulpit committee.

Jonathan Edwards was one of 11 children, and he was fourth in the birth order, and he was the only boy in the family. Believe that. Listen to the names of the children in the family.

The oldest, Esther, Elizabeth, Anne, Mary, Jonathan, Eunice, Abigail, Jerusha, Hannah, Lucy, and Martha. All biblical names, or Lucy, at least the biblical concept, looks like Lucy. Edwards was outwardly a very compliant, obedient child.

He was from his very earliest ages, very studious, very bookish, shy, liked to think, liked to be alone. He was a careful observer of nature and was interested in what they called in those days natural philosophy or what we would now call science or the natural sciences. He was particularly interested as a young boy in spiders.

He loved to sit and observe spiders, particularly how they would spin webs. And he wrote later in college a paper, a scholarly scientific paper on spiders. And from what I understand, it is still referenced by people who study spiders.

Of course, part of the Edwards lore was that he was very precocious and very bright as a young boy. And the rumor got out there that he wrote that paper when he was only 12. And Marsden actually debunks that myth in his book and says, no, he wrote it when he was 17.

So he had a whole five more years under his belt. Well, in 1716, as a 13 year old, he goes off to Yale. And in those days, Yale was probably more like a high school.

He had been homeschooled, mainly taught by his sisters, his older sisters within the home. For the first time, he goes into a school setting at age 13. He's there for four years, graduates at the top of his class in 1720.

And although he, as I said, was outwardly very compliant inside, there was a raging turmoil in his heart because he had not yet been converted. He had not yet experienced conversion, did not feel that he was truly a believer, didn't feel like he really knew the Lord. He agonized over that, fretted over that.

Finally, though, around the year 1721, he never described the exact date, but one of his biographers, at least, Ian Murray, believes it was around 1721 that he was converted. And his conversion came, apparently, after his reading and reflecting on 1 Timothy 1.17. And without looking at your Bible, let me tell you that 1 Timothy 1.17 says, Now unto the king eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God. We sing that on Sunday evening, says our benediction each Sunday evening.

As he reflected on 1 Timothy 1.17, and what is that verse about? It's about the glory of God. If there's one thing about Edwards, he was captivated by God. By the glory of God, the wonder of God, the splendor of God.

That's why he loved nature, that's why he loved spiders. He could see in everything in the world, the splendor, the transcendence, the glory of God as creator. And so it was meditation on that verse that led to his conversion.

Interestingly, in 1722, as a 19-year-old, he began the Puritan practice of writing down a series of resolutions. And it's fascinating to read these resolutions. He started in 1722, added to them over the course of the next year.

But he wrote these 70 resolutions. Let me just read to you some of the things that he wrote. He said, Resolve, number one, resolve that I will do whatsoever I think to be most to God's glory, and my own good, profit, and pleasure in the whole duration of my life, without any consideration of the time, whether now or never so many myriads of ages hence.

Resolve to do whatever I think to be my duty and most for the good and advantage of mankind in general. Resolve to do this whatever difficulties I meet with, how many and how great so ever. Fourth resolution, resolve never to do any manner of thing, whether in soul or body, less or more, what tends to the glory of God, nor be nor suffer it if I can avoid it.

Fifth, resolve never to lose one moment of time, but improve it the most profitable way I possibly can. Sixth, resolve to live with all my might while I do live. Seventh, resolve never to do anything which I should be afraid to do if it were the last hour of my life.

Tenth, resolve when I feel pain to think of the pains of martyrdom and of hell. Reading through this as a 19 year old, this is a man who had an extremely serious and mature understanding of God, a serious hunger

to be disciplined, to use every time, every amount of time that he had, to use all of his energy, to use every occasion in his life to grow in greater godliness and holiness. If you're looking for just an exercise, a spiritual exercise for yourself to develop spiritual discipline, read through these resolutions.

You can just type it in, Google it on the internet and it'll come up. Read through Edward's resolutions. As a young man graduated from college, he was ready to enter into ministry and now converted.

And he went for a while and preached in a small church in New York City and also Bolton, Connecticut. Then he came back to Yale for some further studies from 1724 to 1726. He also served there as a tutor.

And it was during this period of his life in 1724 that he first met a young woman named Sarah Pierpont. He met her when she was only 13 years old. And he was, I guess in 1724 he would have been what, 19? No, 21.

But he immediately was struck by this young girl. She was the daughter of a minister. And he wrote in a book, a blank book, a little prose poem about her that he apparently later gave to her.

And this is what he wrote. 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 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, favor 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 sweetness of temper, uncommon purity in her affections, is most just and praiseworthy in all her actions.

And you could not persuade her to do anything thought 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 times in which this great God has manifested himself to her mind. She will sometimes go about singing sweetly from place to place and seems to be always full of joy and pleasure.

And no one knows for that 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. He's twenty one writing this about the 13 year old that will later become his wife. What he what he admired in her, though, although there are accounts of contemporaries that say she was a very beautiful woman.

What he admired about her was the spiritual quality of her life, that she was somebody who loved God, that she was someone who wanted to serve God. Well, he waited a season. He waited for several years and then he began to court her.

And finally, when she was 18 years of age, they were engaged and married. Michael Hagen says that while Edwards was bookish, shy and basically a nerd, she was warm and outgoing. But she was, I think most importantly, his spiritual equal.

She was a very spiritually mature woman and had a lot of deep and rich experiences of God. Jonathan and Sarah Edwards went on to have 11 children themselves. I said Edwards came from a family of 11 children, and it's been noted that they were a hearty family.

All 11 of Edwards and his siblings made it into adulthood, which wasn't very common in that day, as did all 11 of Jonathan Edwards and Sarah Edwards children. Their names, by the way, were Sarah, Jerusha, Esther, Mary, Lucy, Timothy, Susanna, Judas, Jonathan, Elizabeth and the last son, Pierpont. We know it's a lot of the same names with the same names as his sisters.

And I guess if you're going to name a girl a biblical name there, you know, there's only so many to choose from, unless you want to name them Jezebel or something like that. Yeah, Jerusha is actually one of the most interesting ones. She's the only one that did not live a long life.

She died at age 17, as we'll see later, after nursing a missionary, David Brainerd, that Edwards had welcomed into the home. And she died as a young woman. 1727 is the year, again, that he married Sarah.

In that same year, he went to be the assistant pastor at his grandfather's church. Solomon Stoddard was still there. Again, he served there for 60 years at the Northampton Massachusetts Congregational Church.

Though within a couple of years, Solomon Stoddard had died. Two years later, I think in 1729, Stoddard had died and Edwards then stepped into his grandfather's pulpit to assume the pastorate. Most people who have written about the church say that at that point in its life, it was kind of at a spiritual plateau.

It was a very influential church. But they had introduced about 100 years before, within the previous 100 years, maybe within the previous 50 years, because Stoddard had a role in this, a practice that was called the halfway covenant. And that was basically the New England churches were people who had been puritans who had come over from England.

And they had the idea that they wanted a pure church, a regenerate church. But after a season, kind of when the second generation came along and some of the children and grandchildren weren't as fervent and zealous in the faith as the parents had been, they wanted to sort of make the rules a little more lax for how one could be a participant in the church. And Solomon Stoddard, in particular, had introduced within the congregation under his pastorate the idea of a halfway covenant.

And that is the idea was one could be a communing member of the church, even though he or she could not claim to have been converted. As long as that person would say, I believe that Christianity is true. I believe the Christian and biblical way is morally correct.

But I cannot tell you that I have professed faith or that I have been converted. Solomon Stoddard said, well, at least having them in the church is better than nothing. At least having them there is better than not being here at all.

And so he even went so far as to say they can take the Lord's Supper. And Solomon Stoddard had believed that the Lord's Supper was a converting agent. That if you took the Lord's Supper, that this helped become a kind of means of grace that could lead you to be saved.

Well, what this led to, though, was a very weak church in the time that when Edwards came into the congregation, it was a civic duty to go to church. Everyone went to church. There were about twelve hundred adults that lived in the town of North Hampton.

They had a huge meeting house, seated a couple thousand. Everyone on a Sunday was there. And you went to church because that's what you did.

You also went to church because it was a way to meet people. It was a way to have a range of good marriage, a range that you would get into a family that had land. And that was a commodity.

All the land that was along the Connecticut River was very valuable. Much of it had already been claimed. And so it was a hopeful thing to go to church.

But the church consisted of, again, of many children and grandchildren of believers. But those persons themselves were not believers. And later on, this is going to become a real problem for Edwards when he starts pushing for a pure church membership within this congregation.

Well, he's there and he is now the pastor. And he begins to preach initially on family government. The first thing he preaches about is family because he sees that many of the families have gone away from biblical and Christian families.

Discipleship in the home is the first thing he starts to preach on. He also preaches on the doctrine of justification by faith. How one gets saved.

And as he's been preaching for just a couple of years, finally, there comes an incredible period of awakening. And Edwards, the great observer, the scientist, the naturalist, the man who likes to watch spiders, he observes this thing and he takes copious notes and he observes what happens. And he would say that from December of 1734 to June 1 of 1735, about six months, there was an incredible awakening in that community.

A couple of things preceded in addition to Edwards preaching. Two young people died suddenly within the community. And that sort of shook everyone in the community.

We think about just one of the last couple of weeks, this young man who died in a car accident in Elmorral High School. Maybe that would be an occasion for the shaking of some of those teens at Elmorral High School. Think about their own mortality.

They had that impact. Also, it's recorded that an immoral woman, a company keeper, was converted. And all of a sudden there was just this move of the spirit.

In the course of those six months, 300 people were converted. And in our day, you know, with the willow creeps and things like that, we think, well, 300 doesn't sound like, you know, Billy Graham gets that. You know, that's that's half a section on the stadium.

But this is 300 out of 1200 people in a town. One fourth of the town was converted. And more than that, it was.

Remember, this is an extremely insular town and this was spiritual upheaval. This is people breaking with family ties and traditions to be seriously concerned about their faith. And so it was an amazing event.

The town changed. Reports say that the taverns were empty. People were serious in study, in prayer meetings, in attending to the word of God.

Edwards gave no altar calls. We're talking about altar calls next time with Finney. But every Monday when he went to his study, there would be at the height of the revival, 30 to 40 people waiting to speak with him in response to the moving of the spirit on the Lord's Day worship.

People were converted young and old. The youngest convert was a little girl, Phoebe Bartlett, who was age four, who was apparently gloriously saved. After this period, Edwards continued to preach, continued to teach and disciple.

He wrote in 1737 a little book and we sometimes refer to it as the fateful narrative. And I read this when I was in seminary. But actually, the longer title in good colonial or puritan fashion was a fateful narrative of a surprising work of God and the conversion of many hundred souls in Northampton.

And this book was circulated not only in America, but also over in England. It became kind of an international bestseller sensation and people were reading about this revival in the year 1740. The Methodist evangelist, George Whitfield, came to America.

And this is when the Methodist movement is just starting in England. And the Methodist movement has two prongs to it. You know, there's there's John Wesley, who goes into Arminian theology.

And then there's Whitfield, who is also a Methodist, who is a total Calvinist preaching the sovereign grace of God, God's sovereignty and salvation. And Whitfield comes over to America. He starts preaching.

He preaches in Edwards Church and revival is stirred up. And this begins what is called the first great awakening in America, 1740 to 1742. This is when I said about one seventh of the population they estimate was converted.

Would people talk about America being a Christian nation? This is the time before America became independent from England, when there was a great moving and stirring in the hearts of many people. It will impact and affect America as a nation later on when it's founded. The Great Awakening, by the way, spread down to Virginia.

There was a Presbyterian pastor here in Virginia named Samuel Davies, who preached in Hanover and actually in Hampton, Sydney College, not far from here in Farmville. There was the awakening hit. Their students were converted.

Young men were called into ministry. It was an amazing just kind of a wave that went through the colonies in that time. It's also about this time in 1741 that Edwards preached probably his most famous sermon, and it's probably the one that everybody has heard of.

Because if you ever take an American literature and you've got some anthology of American literature, this sermon is usually in there to give you an example of Puritanism or early colonial religion. The sermon is Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. Edwards preached this in a little church in Enfield, Connecticut, July 8th of 1741.

He went into the church and one person who was there who gave an account said in the beginning that the assembly was spotless and vain. They hardly conducted themselves with common decency. And Edwards began to preach.

He had preached this sermon before in his own church, and it had not created that great of a stir. He began to preach it, though he didn't use a lot of drama. He was not like he was not like Whitfield, who came from a family of actors, who was very dramatic.

He didn't use any hand motions. He didn't raise his voice, didn't shout. Some said that Edwards preached as though he were staring at the bell rope in the back of the meeting house.

He just went through the message. But as he preached and the text was Deuteronomy 32, 35, their foot shall slip in due time. As he preached about hell, about God's wrath for man's sin, the spirit began to move.

People began to be stirred. One of the observers who was there, Stephen Williams, said before the sermon was done, there was a great moaning and crying out throughout the whole house. What shall I do to be saved? Oh, I am going to hell.

Or what shall I do for Christ? Edwards, who had been building up the intensity of the sermon, had to stop and ask the people to be quiet. Who were shouting out in anguish and pain at the conviction that the Holy Spirit was putting on them. The tumult, Marston says, only increased as the shrieks and cries were piercing and amazing.

Edwards waited a while, so that he continued, so that he might be heard. But he realized after a while he would never be able to complete the sermon. He never completed it.

Because people came under such heavy conviction. They just had to stop preaching. Finally, after people had settled down, they sang an effecting hymn, heard a prayer and were dispersed.

The infamous passage in Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God is this. Edwards said, The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked. His wrath towards you burns like fire.

He looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire. He is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in His sight. You are ten thousand times so abominable in His eyes as the most hateful, venomous serpent is in ours.

You have offended Him infinitely, more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince, and yet tis nothing but His hand that holds you from falling into the fire. Every moment is to be ascribed to nothing else that you did not go to hell last night, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you haven't gone to hell since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking His pure eyes by your sinful, wicked manner of attending His solemn worship.

Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you don't this very moment drop into hell. O sinner, consider the fearful danger you are in. That sermon is often pilloried as an example of the hatefulness of Puritanism, but really that wasn't Edward's point at all.

His point was that God's the one that holds you back from falling into hell. You're deserving of His wrath and judgment, but by His grace He holds you from falling into hell. That's really His point.

It's really about the grace of God in allowing you not to receive the full measure, the just recompense for your sin. And as you can imagine, it had quite an impact on the people who were there who heard that

sermon, and they were deeply moved and many were converted. Well, you would think, with such a wonderful pastor of international fame, that he would just have it easy from there, right? Well, he didn't.

For one thing, he was criticized. He was criticized by many of his fellow ministers, particularly those who were adherents of strict Calvinistic orthodoxy. They felt like, why are you trying to talk people into believing in Jesus? God can convert them on His own.

We don't need to use these measures to manipulate people. But he was careful, always though in his preaching, to always present salvation as the work of God in men's lives. Also, he began to have, unfortunately, some problems within his church, conflict within the church.

One of the most infamous was in 1744, there was conflict with some of the young people in the church. A group of young men had gotten hold of some books on midwifery, and there were some kind of prurient pictures, and they began joking about them. And actually, Marsden says the real issue was that they were, he says, a form of sexual harassment.

They were harassing the young ladies, and Edwards is a father of young girls, and he decided he needed to discipline these young people. And so one day, kind of unfortunately, he announced there would be a disciplinary session, and he read out the names of those that were going to be disciplined, and also some witnesses to their ill behavior before the congregation. Some of these young people were the children of some of those prominent members of the church, and they became upset.

A controversy ensued that swirled for several months. It ended with the young men repenting of having been kind of disobedient, but never owning up to their original problem. And this sort of set off some resentment against Edwards.

He was seen as being too strict, being too hard, being too narrow. He was also, one writer said he was a student minister. He thought of ministry as primarily the ministry of studying the word.

A day of ministry for Edwards was to spend 13 hours in study of scriptures and prayer. He was not one who was going to drop in at your house some afternoon, or hold your hand while you went through something. His ministry was to study the word and preach the word, and he was criticized for being impersonal in his pastoral ministry.

The problem kind of boiled, and then it reached a point where he began to enforce some of the purity issues within the church. There were some people who presented themselves for membership in the old way. They wanted to be sort of halfway members.

They weren't really converted, but they wanted to be communicants in the church, and he didn't want to let them do that. And so finally, it seems hard to believe that a man like Edwards would come to this. But in 1750, the leaders of the church called for a vote of confidence in his ministry.

And in those days, only the men could vote in this kind of conference that they had. They were a congregational church, and so the members could come and vote. And only 23 of the 230 men who came to the meeting stood with Edwards.

The others voted for his removal. By the way, while all this is going on, he has the missionary, David Brainerd, who's a missionary to the Indians, who has contracted tuberculosis, who's come and lived in his house. His daughter, Jerusha, has nursed him, and Brainerd dies.

Later, Jerusha dies. Edwards has taken Brainerd's diaries and published them as the diary of David Brainerd. And that, by the way, is another spiritual missionary classic.

And if you're ever looking for something that is extremely stirring and challenging to read or listen to, it's the diary of David Brainerd. So even while he's ministering and pursuing selflessly ministry, his congregation gets together and fires him. But then after that happened, they realized they didn't have anybody to fill the pulpit, and so they asked him if he would stay on and preach for a while.

So he preached for six more months after he'd been fired. But they say, to his credit, that during that time he never had a difficult word, never had a negative word about the congregation. He just continued and preached on, served on.

Although his farewell sermon is a masterpiece in which he reminds the people, quote, Ministers and people under their care must meet one another before Christ's tribunal at the day of judgment. That was the theme of his final message at Northampton. After this tough end at that church, he'd been there for 23 years.

His grandfather had been there for 60 years before him. He was offered many opportunities. He was offered to go to Scotland.

He was offered to come to a church in Virginia. But he chose to go a little further west to what was really the frontier in Massachusetts, to a little town called Stockbridge, where there was a little congregational church. And he went there to be the pastor and also to be a missionary to Indians.

There was an Indian community there who satanic tribe. And so he preached to them through an interpreter and also ministered a small congregational church. It ended up being a blessing for him to be there.

He had more leisure time than he had as a as a pastor in Northampton. And this is when he did some of his most productive writing to his best known theological works. One is shortened as called the freedom of the will.

The actual longer name is a careful and strict inquiry into the modern prevailing notions of that freedom of the will, which is supposed to be essential to moral agency. I wrote that in 1754 and in 1758, he wrote the great Christian doctrine of original sin defended. In 1757, he's called to be the president of the College of New Jersey, which we now know as Princeton.

He succeeded, by the way, as president at Princeton. His son in law, the Reverend Aaron Burr, who had married his daughter Esther. And unfortunately, Aaron Burr had died about five years into the marriage with Esther.

And so he succeeded his son in law as president of Princeton. He was inaugurated as president on February the 16th of 1758. In those days, the smallpox vaccination was a new scientific improvement for people's health.

And Edwards was always, again, somewhat interested in naturalistic philosophy. He thought it was a good idea for people to be inoculated against smallpox. And so as president of the college, he led the way to get inoculated and his family to show students it was OK to have done.

Unfortunately, though, after he had the smallpox vaccination, he contracted a very serious form of the disease. And within, I think, five or six weeks of having been inaugurated as the president of Princeton, he passed away. He died.

His wife, Sarah, wrote this note to their daughter, Esther, after she learned of her husband's death. And she was back in Stockbridge. She had not yet even moved to Princeton when her husband died.

She wrote to Esther, Oh, my very dear child, what shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. Oh, that we may kiss the rod of reproof and lay our hands on our mouths. The Lord has done it.

He has made me adore his goodness that we had him so long. But my God lives and he has my heart. Oh, what a legacy my husband and your father has left us.

We are all given to God. And there I am and love to be Sarah Edwards. Can you imagine a person whose faith would allow them to think like this when they lose a husband at age 55? It's amazing that the spirituality of our forebears, particularly colonial American forebears, is amazing.

That's why we have the nation we have. But we're on the shoulders of these giants. You wonder where we're going to be when there aren't the giants among us that there used to be in people like this.

Let me go on to the second part of this, the lasting influence of Edwards. Let me just trace a few things. First, I think one of the key things that Edwards brought to Christianity, reminded Christians of in his age and in ages since, is that one must have a personal experience of the Lord in order to truly be converted.

Marsden, in his biography, calls this Edwards' best known quote from one of his sermons, where he says, It is not he that has heard a long description of the sweetness of honey that can be said to have the greatest understanding of it, but he that has tasted it. You don't understand honey if you know all about it. You can describe it and talk about how wonderful it is.

The man knows how sweet honey is who has tasted it. And for Edwards, being converted means something happens in your heart. It's not just mental ascent to the orthodox doctrine.

It's that God has touched your heart and changed your heart and you have tasted of the goodness of God. And that was a radical idea in his day. There were many who wanted to just kind of pass on a veneer of cultural Christianity like his grandfather.

Well, if we can't have people converted, let's at least have them in church. But Edwards' view was no, what needs to happen is that God needs to do a work in a person's heart. Second, he believed that God is sovereign in salvation and that he may choose to move among a people in surprising and unexpected ways to awaken faith in them.

Edwards understood the revivals, the awakenings that he experienced in his age to have been the work of God. He did not aim for them. He did nothing to stir them.

They just came. They just came upon the people when the word was preached. And I think that goes back, obviously, to his theological commitments.

He was a Calvinist. He believed in the sovereignty of God and salvation. And one of the things that you hear is, well, if you believe in the sovereignty of God and salvation, why do you need to share the gospel?

Why do you need to preach if you believe God is in charge of salvation? But the thing about it is, if you look back through history, the most ardent evangelists and missionaries were people who believed in the sovereignty of God and salvation.

William Carey, the father of modern missions, was actually influenced by Jonathan Edwards. He, like others in England, read Edwards' works. In our own day, some of the most effective evangelists, missionaries, apologists, the R.C. Sprouls, the John Pipers, the John MacArthurs, are men who believe in the sovereignty of God and salvation.

And Edwards was one of the forerunners of that. Somebody who believes in the sovereignty of God and salvation, but also passionately preaches the gospel in hopes that God will use that as the means for the conversion of many. Third, I think we learned from Edwards that real revival begins with doctrinal preaching about the wrath and justice of God.

Think back to that sermon, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. Did he go overboard to say, oh, how much God loves you? No. And I think Edwards, it reminds me of a video we saw several weeks ago.

You don't understand your need for the cure, you don't understand the cure unless you understand your malady. You don't appreciate the cure unless you understand what your malady is. And Edwards' approach in evangelism was to preach that we're sinners, we're deserving of God's wrath, to preach the holiness of God, the justice of God.

And then when we come under conviction of our sin, we'll begin to understand we are sinners. And the wrath of God is laid upon us. We'll begin to understand that.

That's when we will understand grace. That's when we will understand what it means to be saved by grace through faith. And it has a radical impact on our hearts and lives.

Fourth, Edwards, I think, believed that real revival must be accompanied by real reform and purity in the churches. And of course, unfortunately, in Northampton, he was unable to sort of complete that. But it was something, I think, that he desired.

That if you're going to have a regenerate church, you must also strive for the purity of that church to safeguard the integrity of gospel. In 1787, some years after, nearly 30 years after Edwards' death, Ezra Stiles, who was the president of Yale, made this prediction about Edwards' works. He said, in another generation, they will pass into as transient notice, perhaps scarce above oblivion.

In other words, we got all this new theology. In a couple of years, no one will even remember Jonathan Edwards. Never was a prediction more wrong.

Jonathan Edwards has probably read more and loved more than ever at any time right now. People have rediscovered him. People are rereading his sermons, republishing his sermons.

He was a person who wrote copious notes. He didn't have much paper. He would write on anything.

It's one of those kind of things that you understand the embarrassment of the riches in our day when we have paper to write on. I mean, every scrap, every envelope, every book that had a blank page, he was writing on. Recording notes, observations, spiritual thoughts, reflections on what he had read in Bible study, something he thought God had said to him in prayer.

Always thinking, studying, and we have a huge treasure of many things that he's written to encourage the saints of this generation. I'm going to stop there.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/14/SID14370.mp3>

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