

PART ONE

Background, Nature, and Importance of Religious Affections

SAMPLE

SESSION ONE

Introduction to Jonathan and Sarah Edwards

Suggested Reading:

- George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*. Yale University Press, 2003.
- Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987.
- Edna Gerstner, *Jonathan and Sarah: An Uncommon Union*. Soli Deo Gloria, 1995.

I. Introduction to Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

A) His reputation

1) Positive

“The profoundest reasoner, and the greatest divine, in my opinion, that America ever produced.”²

“He was, in the estimation of the writer, one of the most holy, humble and heavenly minded men, that the world has seen, since the apostolic age.”³

“The Greatest, wisest, humblest and holiest of uninspired men.”⁴

“Never was there a happier combination of great power with great piety.”⁵

“Edwards was extraordinary. By many estimates, he was the most acute early American philosopher and the most brilliant of all American theologians. At least three of his many works—*Religious Affections*, *Freedom of the Will*, and *The Nature of True Virtue*—stand as masterpieces in the larger history of Christian literature.”⁶

“No man is more relevant to the present condition of Christianity than Jonathan Edwards ... He was a mighty theologian and a great evangelist at the same time. ... He was pre-eminently the theologian of revival. If you want to know anything about true revival, Edwards is the man to consult.”⁷

² Samuel Davies, 1759; quoted in Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Banner of Truth Trust: Edinburgh, 1987; reprint, 1988), xv.

³ Ashbel Green, President of the College of New Jersey, 1822; quoted in Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, xv.

⁴ A note in John Collett Ryland's copy of Hopkins' Life of Edwards; quoted in Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, xv.

⁵ Thomas Chalmers, quoted by G. D. Henderson in 'Jonathan Edwards and Scotland', *The Evangelical Quarterly*, January 1944; quoted in Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, xvi.

⁶ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2003) 1.

⁷ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, 1976; quoted in Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, xvii.

2) Negative

“A visionary enthusiast, and not to be minded in anything he says.”⁸

“The life of Edwards is a tragedy. ... Because of his faith Edwards wrought incalculable harm. ... a more repulsive individual never influenced history.”⁹

“If he had lived a hundred years later and breathed the air of freedom, he could not have written with such old-world barbarism as we find in his volcanic sermons.”¹⁰

“His philosophical insight was buried under the ruins of his religion. He failed to see the futility of insisting on the Puritan principles.”¹¹

3) What accounts for the difference of opinion regarding Edwards?

“Here is the fundamental reason why opinions on Edwards are so divided, and why his biographers should also differ so widely. The division runs right back to the Bible, and, depending on where we stand in relation to Christ, we shall join ourselves to one side or the other in interpreting this man who was, first of all, a Christian.”¹²

B) Personal highlights

- 1703: Born to Timothy and Esther (Stoddard) Edwards
- Proficient in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew by age 13
- 1720: BA, Yale
- 1722: MA, Yale
- 1729: Elected Pastor of Congregational Church in Northampton, Massachusetts
- 1746: *The Religious Affections* published
- 1750: Dismissed from Northampton church over disagreement regarding who may participate in the Lord’s Table, among other things; moved to Stockbridge to minister to the Indians
- 1757: Elected president of Princeton
- 1758: Died from smallpox vaccination

Timothy Edwards, Jonathan’s father, was a faithful minister with earned B.A. and M.A. degrees from Harvard. He was “an effective preacher of revival” and “an expert on the

⁸ Charles Chauncy, quoted in Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, xxiii.

⁹ Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (The University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst, 1949), 16, 148, 133; quoted in Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, xxi, xxiii.

¹⁰ Oliver Wendell Holmes, quoted in Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, xx.

¹¹ Herbert Schneider, quoted in Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, xxi.

¹² Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, xxvi-xxvii. Modern scholarship on Edwards exhibits a similar tendency. Beginning with Perry Miller, Edwards scholars have often secularized Edwards in downplaying or ignoring his Christ-centered theology or in treating his philosophical writings in abstraction from his biblical foundation and focus. Edwards is thereby made more acceptable to modern scholarship. In addition, many scholars have made Edwards into their own image by reading their own theology and worldview into his writings. One must read Edwards to truly understand Edwards, as the secondary literature can be misleading. For a brief summary of the history of Edwards scholarship, see the Introduction in Craig Biehl, *The Infinite Merit of Christ: The Glory of Christ’s Obedience in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Jackson, MS: Reformed Academic Press, 2009).

science of conversion.”¹³ Jonathan was acquainted with “awakenings” from a young age. “According to Jonathan’s later estimation, of all the pastors in the region, only his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, oversaw more local awakenings” than his father Timothy Edwards.¹⁴

Jonathan had ten sisters and was the only son in a family of eleven siblings.

C) His view of the family

“We have had great disputes how the church ought to be regulated; and indeed the subject of these disputes was of great importance: but the due regulation of your families is of no less, and in some respects, of much greater importance. Every Christian family ought to be as it were a little church, consecrated to Christ, and wholly influenced and governed by his rules. And family education and order are some of the chief of the means of grace. If these fail, all other means are like to prove ineffectual. If these are duly maintained, all the means of grace will be like to prosper and be successful.”¹⁵

D) His preaching

“A preacher of low and moderate voice, a natural way of delivery, and without any agitation of body, or anything else in the manner to excite attention, except his habitual and great solemnity, looking and speaking as in the presence of God.”¹⁶

“What is clear is that the impression made by Edwards as a preacher owed little to the actual manner of his delivery. His voice was low and calm. He aimed to avoid ‘a sad tone’ and the ‘very ridiculous whining tone’ which he heard from some men. ‘He made but little motion with his head or hands,’ observes Hopkins. What was striking was the distinctness and clarity of his thought (‘he handled concepts,’ in McGiffert’s phrase, ‘as scrupulously and precisely as a banker handles currency’) together with a seriousness arising from ‘a solemn consciousness of the presence of God’. This seriousness, says Dwight, ‘was visible in his looks and general demeanor. It obviously had a controlling influence over all his preparations for the pulpit.’ On the same point he quotes Hopkins: ‘He appeared with such gravity and solemnity, and his words were so full of ideas, that few speakers have been able to command the attention of an audience as he did.’”¹⁷

II. Introduction to Sarah Edwards and the Edwards’ Household

“Felt great satisfaction in being at the house of Mr. Edwards. A sweeter couple I have not yet seen. Their children were not dressed in silks and satins, but plain, as become the

¹³ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 25, 26.

¹⁴ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 25.

¹⁵ Jonathan Edwards, “A Farewell Sermon Preached at the First Precinct in Northampton, After the People’s Public Rejection of their Minister...on June 22, 1750,” in *Sermons and Discourses 1743-1758*, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 25 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 484.

¹⁶ John Gillies, quoted in Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 175.

¹⁷ Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 191.

children of those who, in all things, ought to be examples of Christian simplicity. Mrs. Edwards is adorned with a meek and quiet spirit; she talked solidly of the things of God, and seemed to be such a helpmeet for her husband, that she caused me to renew those prayers, which, for some months, I have put up to God, that he would be pleased to send me a daughter of Abraham to be my wife.”¹⁸

“Very courteously treated here. The most agreeable family I was ever acquainted with. Much of the presence of God here.”¹⁹

“Edwards preached against husbands who ‘treated their wives like servants’ and who failed to ‘study to suit’ their partner. No one could suppose that Sarah’s heavy share of labour in directing the home was due to any thoughtlessness on his part. Their respective work was happily agreed. ‘No person of discernment could be conversant in the family,’ writes Hopkins, ‘without observing and admiring the great harmony and mutual love and esteem that subsisted between them.’”²⁰

Sarah Edwards had a “lasting impact” on Samuel Hopkins, “Edwards’ best known successor” and first biographer. “His biographical memoir, published in 1765, included a glowing tribute to Sarah. Admiring her for, among other virtues, having ‘the law of kindness on her tongue,’ Hopkins’ portrait follows that same rule. He described her as ‘a more than ordinary beautiful person; of a pleasant, agreeable countenance.’ The genuineness of her piety was manifested in her concerns for charity toward the poor and her extraordinary kindness to guests and strangers. Moreover, she ‘paid proper deference to Mr. Edwards,’ catered to the peculiarities of his Spartan diet, and was a tender nurse to him in his illness. She too frequently ‘labored under bodily disorders and pains’ but cheerfully and without complaint.”²¹

Questions and Points for Discussion

- 1) Iain Murray notes that the disparate opinions of Edwards can be traced to different opinions concerning the God of Edwards. What does this tell you about the ministry of Edwards, and what a faithful minister of Christ should expect in the court of public opinion?
- 2) Would the content and style of Edwards’ preaching be popular today? Why or why not?

¹⁸ George Whitefield after a stay in the Edwards home, quoted in Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 178.

¹⁹ Minister Joseph Emerson after a stay in the Edwards’ home, quoted in Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 185.

²⁰ Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 191-192. Samuel Hopkins was well-acquainted with the Edwards’ household, having lived in their home while studying with Mr. Edwards for upwards of a year from December of 1741 through 1742. See Stephen West, *Sketches of the Life of the Late, Rev. Samuel Hopkins, D. D.* (Hartford, 1805), 40-45.

²¹ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 251.

- 3) How and to what extent do you think Sarah Edwards' ministry as a homemaker was a factor in the depth and breadth of God's ministry through Jonathan Edwards?

- 4) Is Edwards' view of the family as one of God's "chief means of grace" applicable today? Would the application of his view of the family in contemporary Christian families prove beneficial to the church?

- 5) The greatest American theologian was dismissed from his church by a vote of his congregation. What lessons can be learned from this?