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Teaching Notes

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A.C.T.S. Heroes of the Faith Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

I. “Logic on Fire”

A. “Sinners in the hands of an angry God”

1. July 8, 1741 substitute preacher stands up to proclaim word of God to a town bypassed by revival
2. Text: Deuteronomy 28:35 *“Their feet shall slide in due time.”*
3. Doctrine

"There is nothing that keeps wicked men at any one moment out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God." By the mere pleasure of God, I mean his sovereign pleasure, his arbitrary will, restrained by no obligation, hindered by no manner of difficulty, any more than if nothing else but God's mere will had in the least degree, or in any respect whatsoever, any hand in the preservation of wicked men one moment."

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 thousands times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.

4. A troublesome view of God; a troublesome view of Edwards

"And if they had been taught aright,
Small children carried bedwards
Would shudder lest they meet that night
The God of Mr. Edwards

Abraham's God, the Wrathful One
Intolerant of error
Not God the Father or the Son
But God the Holy Terror"

(“the Theology of Jonathan Edwards,” Phyllis McGinley, 1961)

5. Piper's cogent questions

And before any of us, especially us pastors, sniffs at Edwards' imagery, we had better think long and hard what our own method is for helping our people feel the weight of the reality of **Revelation 19:15**. Edwards stands before this text with awe. He virtually gapes at what he sees here. John writes in this verse, "**He [Christ] will tread the wine press of the fierceness of the wrath of God the Almighty.**"

Listen to Edwards' comment in this sermon,

The words are exceeding terrible. If it had only been said, "the wrath of God," the words would have implied that which is infinitely dreadful: but it is "the fierceness and wrath of God! The fierceness of Jehovah! O how dreadful must that be! Who can utter or conceive what such expressions carry in them?"

What high school student is ever asked to come to grips with what really is at issue here? If the Bible is true, and if it says that someday Christ will tread his enemies like a winepress with anger that is fierce and almighty, and if you are a pastor charged with applying Biblical truth to your people so that they will flee the wrath to come, then what would *your* language be? What would you say to make people feel the reality of texts like these?

Edwards labored over language and over images and metaphors because he was so stunned and awed at the realities he saw in the Bible. Did you hear that one line in the quote I just read: "Who can utter or conceive what such expressions carry in them?" Edwards believed that it was impossible to exaggerate the horror of the reality of hell.

High school teachers would do well to ask their students the really probing question, "Why is it that Jonathan Edwards struggled to find images for wrath and hell that shock and frighten, while contemporary preachers try to find abstractions and circumlocutions that move away from concrete, touchable Biblical pictures of unquenchable fire and undying worms and gnashing of teeth?" If our students were posed with this simple, historical question, my guess is that some of the brighter ones would answer: "Because Jonathan Edwards really believed in hell, but most preachers today don't."

B. Mark Noll's Assessment

Since Edwards, American evangelicals have not thought about life from the ground up as Christians because their entire culture has ceased to do so. Edwards's piety continued on in the revivalist tradition, his theology continued on in academic Calvinism, but there were no successors to his God-entranced world-view or his profoundly theological philosophy. The disappearance of Edwards's perspective in American Christian history has been a tragedy.

C. Other assessments

(Iain Murray, p.xv)

Major Events of Jonathan Edwards's Life

1703	(October 5) Born in East Windsor, Connecticut
1716	Admitted to Yale
1720	Graduates; continues studying at Yale for the ministry
1722	(August) Converted to Christ by reading "Now unto the King eternal..." (1 Tim. 1:17)
1722	Served as Pastor to a Presbyterian church in New York for 8 months
1722	(December) Began writing "Resolutions"; continued until August 17, 1723
1724	Elected a tutor at Yale
1726	Called to Northampton Church as assistant minister to grandfather Solomon Stoddard
1727	(July 28) Married seventeen year-old Sarah Pierrepont
1729	(February) Solomon Stoddard died; Edwards full minister at Northampton
1731	Delivers Public Lecture at First Church, Boston
1734	Beginning of revival in Northampton; <i>Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God</i>
1735-36	Revival continues in New England
1740	Meets George Whitefield, who joins him in Awakening preaching
1741	(July 8) Preaches "Sinners in the hands of an angry God" at Enfield, CT
1741	Publishes <i>The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God</i>
1746	Publishes <i>Treatise on Religious Affections</i>
1747	Death of David Brainerd in Edwards's home
1748	Beginning of dissension in Northampton church over communion
1749	Publishes <i>An Account of the Life of Rev. David Brainerd</i>
1750	(June 22) Evicted as minister at Northampton; preaches farewell sermon on 2 Cor. 1:14
1751	Settled in Stockbridge as missionary to Indians
1754	<i>A Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of Freedom of the Will</i>
1757	Chosen to be President of College of New Jersey (Princeton)
1758	Published <i>The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended</i>
1758	(March 22) Died of smallpox inoculation

I. Edwards: Personal Walk With God

- A. Conversion
- B. Sovereignty of God
- C. Resolutions
- D. Visions of the Glory of God

II. Edwards: Pastor

- A. Personal characteristics
- B. Pastor-theologian

C. Trouble in Northampton

D. Gracious Departure

III. Edwards: Theologian & Philosopher

A. Treatise on Religious Affections

B. Freedom of the Will

IV. Edwards: Revivalist

A. The Revival's Great Preacher

B. The Revival's Greatest Analyst

C. Corporate Prayer

V. Edwards: Missionary

A. Brained's Life and Diary

B. Edwards's Missionary Zeal

“As you would seek the future prosperity of this society, it is of vast importance that you should avoid contention.

“A contentious people will be a miserable people. The contentions which have been among you, since I first became your pastor, have been one of the greatest burdens I have labored under in the course of my ministry—not only the contentions you have had with me, but those which you have had with one another, about your lands and other concerns—because I knew that contention, heat of spirit, evil speaking, and things of the like nature, were directly contrary to the spirit of Christianity, and did in a peculiar manner, tend to drive away God's Spirit from a people, and to render all means of grace ineffectual, as well as destroy a people's outward comfort and welfare.

“Let me therefore earnestly exhort you as you would seek your own future good, hereafter to watch against a contentious spirit. ‘If you would see good days, seek peace, and ensue it’ (I Peter 3:10–11). Let the late contention about the terms of Christian communion, as it has been the greatest, be the last. I would, now as I am preaching my farewell sermon, say to you, as the apostle to the Corinthians, 2 Cor. 13:11 ‘Finally brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.’ ”