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18th Century: Jonathan Edwards

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A Tradition of Greatness

America continues to flourish as a nation today because of the powerful impact of both men and women throughout the ages. Jonathan Edwards is one such historical figure whose fame and influence remain as true today as three hundred years ago, during his fifty-five years of life. A strong connection can be discovered on the effect of Edwards role as a father to his children, arguing that the greatness of Edwards directly relates to the prestige of all eleven children. Through a thorough examination of the character of Edwards, the environment of the Edwards home and the incredible phenomenon of the descendants of both Jonathan and Sarah Edwards, we can gain an understanding of the effect of God's blessing towards those who serve Him. It was through the self-sacrificing leadership of Edwards and his desire to lead through example that all eleven Edwards children were able to, in turn, carry on the tradition of greatly affecting society.

In October of 1703, a baby boy was born to Timothy and Esther Edwards. The child, Jonathan Edwards, would grow to become one of America's most influential thinkers during the 18th century. However, Edwards' life also plays an important role in the understanding of religion in modern day America. The magnitude of Edwards' life has been investigated by numerous historians and theologians, specifically George Marsden in his *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*. Marsden described Edwards as “an activist at the center of the most important religious and social movement of his day, he oversaw an amazing local revival, which became a prototype for one of America's most influential religious practices” (10). Edwards' sermons and ideas were monumental during the time of the Great Awakening and served as a cause for international awakenings to follow. Before this great thinker can be understood, there must be an investigation of the contributing factors which led to the intricate and truly unique character of Edwards.

One of the most important elements behind Edwards' greatness was the supportive, sweet and tender spirit of his wife, Sarah. All who came in contact with Mrs. Edwards spoke of her with nothing but the highest praise,

complimenting the manner in which she served her husband and children daily. One of the earliest records of Edwards' description of who would one day become his wife occurred during his time at Yale on the back of his Greek grammar notebook. Marsden's novel *A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards* records this description in his novel, stating

“there are certain seasons in which this Great Being, in some way or another invisible, comes to her [Sarah] and fills her mind with exceeding sweet delight, and she hardly cares for anything except to meditate on him. She had a strange sweetness in her mind, and singular purity in her affections; is most just and conscientious in all her conduct” (17).

It is evident that Sarah Edwards found complete fulfillment in her relationship with Christ and in turn the sweetness and purity of His character overflowed into her person, making her radiant and extremely attractive to Jonathan. Edwards found proof of the tenderness of God's heart in the character of this young woman who was captivating him entirely (Marsden, *A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards*).

Although we can become acquainted to both Jonathan and Sarah Edwards individually, the intricacies of their marriage remains a mystery to historians. In Ralph Turnbull's novel, *Jonathan Edwards: The Preacher*, this very idea emerges as a topic for discussion. Turnbull found difficulty in discovering “the emotional center of this many-layered marriage [because] we can no more surmise than we can say for sure what went on in the mind of Mozart. The inner truth about Jonathan and Sarah Edwards was locked between them” (25). The Edwardses were extremely private when it came to their relationship as a couple yet from their individual strengths, they were able to truly model the relationship of Christ and the Church.

Another factor playing into the renowned name of Jonathan Edwards was the passion and drive with which he lived his life. Edwards displayed signs of greatness at the age of thirteen when he entered what would later be renamed Yale University, claiming the title of youngest in the class, later becoming the valedictory orator in 1720 (Dodds). Edwards constantly was fascinated with philosophy, theology, nature and numerous other areas, seeking to answer the difficult and complex questions of life. Throughout his teenage years, Edwards faced many internal battles as he attempted to look at his foundational beliefs and the beliefs being taught in the

classrooms of Yale. In *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, Marsden describes Edwards as one who “wrestled with the largest intellectual issues of his day, and these intense inquiries shaped his outlook for his entire life” (18). Edwards was not one to shy away from a challenge, evident by his thirst for knowledge while he learned to discern true doctrine from false doctrine. In comparison to fellow thinkers during the 18th century, Edwards was a rarity because of the unique manner in which he processed through thoughts of great depth. As stated above, Edwards sought absolute truth and as such, greatly relied on the intercession of the Holy Spirit to aid him in this endeavor. Marsden found Edwards to be a man who “would retain a thought, turn it about, test it against another thought, tuning out the many distractions that scatter the attention of most people” (66). A desire to completely immerse himself into God's creation kept the wheels turning in the mind of Edwards.

The influence and impact of Edwards is most clearly evident in the area of preaching. Both Piper and Taylor, in *A God Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, illuminate Edwards desire to express, through preaching, “to be full of Christ alone; to love him with a holy and true love; to trust in him; to live upon him” (70). Edwards sought to lead his congregation always by example, serving as their shepherd, towards increasing in trust and love towards Christ. Edwards is most renowned for sermons such as *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, where he admonished his congregation to recognize the seriousness and reality of Hell. While at times, Edwards preached “massively in earnest and, it must be admitted, tactless, he plodded along, blasted his congregation,” he was also deemed “a compassionate pastor” (86). Edwards had no problem sternly conveying to his congregation the seriousness of sin and its consequences yet, he also understood the importance of leading by compassion. Obviously, Edwards was not perfect therefore responded humanly to situations which arose within the church. However, he ultimately sought the good of each member of his congregation, whether that preaching sternly or kindly.

The character and prestige of Jonathan Edwards did not end with his death in March of 1758 but rather grew exponentially with the emergence of his eleven children into society. Few find grounds to deny the powerful impact of the Edwards family because their immense effect on society is undeniable. Elisabeth Dodds, in her novel *Marriage to a Difficult Man*, brings light to this “brood of children whose social contribution is a phenomenon of American history” (37). From the beginning, it remains remarkable that all eleven children

survived birth and childhood during the 18th century as Norman Fiering discusses in his novel, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context*, because the infant mortality touched 100 percent (15). Couples were having children at very high rates, reaching family sizes of thirteen to fourteen, but most would not survive past the age of six because of the harsh environment. Dodds paints a realistic picture of the difficulty many Puritan couples faced when starting families by her argument of the miracle of the Edwards family. “That all the Edwards babies thrived in such precarious times is a comment on Sarah's instinctive sense of nutrition, her clean house, and her good health during pregnancy” (45). Through observing the manner in which Sarah took care of herself during pregnancies, we can gain insight into the structure of the Edwards family.

Firstly, the importance of having any sense of stability within a family was of immense importance because it guaranteed “the continuity of the new society” (Dodds, 24). Having structure and coherence within a unit, such as a family, allows it to flourish and grow. At the very core of the Edwards family was its devotion to serving Christ, which ultimately outlined the means by which it acted daily. As Dodds so accurately describes, “one source of the family stability was the steady dependable routine of prayers which they had together, before breakfast and again after supper. . . The surge and thunder of the King James Bible, heard twice a day aloud in their father's voice, became part of the children's earliest memories” (48). It is clear that the Edwards children were taught the importance of starting and finishing one's day in quiet meditation and prayer. Growing up with a pastor as a father, they were taught all about the history of the church as well as the value in connecting the Old and New Testaments. It was very common for the Edwards children to be quizzed by their father at the dinner table on a range of Biblical topics, including questions such as “how long was it after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar until Babylon was destroyed by Cyrus?” (50).

Secondly, the Edwards children were raised, modeling 1 Corinthians 12 with the description of the importance of unity within a body. As Ola Elizabeth discusses in *Jonathan Edwards: 1703-1758: A Biography*, “the [Edwards] house functioned efficiently because all of these highly individual children taught to work together” (46). In a large family, there are very few opportunities for alone-time simply because there is always someone around to play or talk with. In the Edwards family, it was no different. A huge factor in the efficiency of the Edwards family was the very fact that all eleven children learned the valuable lesson of working with others

from a young age. Even individuals who came in contact with the Edwards children noticed how well the Edwards children behaved around each other. Arthur McGiffert describes the reactions of visitors of the Edwards home in his novel, *Jonathan Edwards*, specifically on the behavior of the children. Most all of the visitors seemed “to have impressed that eleven children managed to be lively and individual as personalities, yet could act courteously with one another and function as a coordinated unit” (39). All eleven children were not clones of each other. Each was gifted differently and similarly struggled differently. Yet, because of their strong upbringing they were able to treat each other with kindness and gentility.

Thirdly, Jonathan and Sarah Edwards did not shy away from teaching their children the importance of hard work and responsibility with life's daily tasks. Life during the 18th century was not easy and the daily chores of the Edwards family were beyond numerous. Dodds touches upon the individual responsibility of each child further on in her novel: “All the children's accomplishments were the result of their personal initiative” (39). The motivation behind the children's actions was purely from self and stemmed from a desire to be responsible. Whether it was simply watching the roast over the fire or gardening, each child had some form or responsibility, allowing them to serve as one of the many parts of the unified body. In *Jonathan Edwards: His Life and Influence*, written by Conrad Cherry, the novel focuses on specific examples in how Jonathan and Sarah taught their children responsibility, in its many forms. Near the middle of the novel, Cherry notes that “The Edwardses saw that the children learned to be orderly about money. The family Bible contains a record of the savings of each child, with receipts, expenditures, and borrowings neatly recorded” (46). In something as seemingly simple as finances, the Edwards took great care in teaching their children responsibility with any monetary gifts from the Lord.

Finally, the Edwards children were taught the importance of correction, in the form of discipline. Ralph Turnbull's *Jonathan Edwards: the Preacher*, displays as in all areas on life, how Jonathan and Sarah “approached the discipline of their children as a united pair, and this may be one reason why the children, in turn, married happily” (48). All eleven children were constantly able to observe their parents carrying out the commission of 1 Corinthians 12, through using their spiritual gifts together to create this environment called home. Jonathan and Sarah sought to instill in their children immediate action when given a task or corrected. Dodds discusses

observations from Samuel Hopkins on the manner in which near the end of her novel, painting a beautiful picture of the essence of obedience.

They [Jonathan and Sarah] had need to speak but once; they was cheerfully obeyed; murmuring and answering again were not known among them [children]. In their manners they were uncommonly respectful of their parents...when either parent was speaking they were all immediately silent and attentive. The parental authority, seemed to naturally promote a filial respect and affection and to lead them to a mild tender treatment of each other” (43).

It is clearly evident from the above observation that immediate obedience was of immense importance in the Edwards household. Jonathan and Sarah's goal was to foster an environment where their children would learn to cheerfully obey those in authority. From this lesson of obedience to authority, naturally respect and affection arose among the siblings and from children to parents.

The simple yet wonderfully astounding data collected not only on Edwards eleven children but on generations to follow, speaks volumes of their impact on American history. The following facts from Dodd's novel are both staggering and great reminders of the legacy of the Edwards family: 13 college presidents, 65 professors, 100 lawyers, 30 judges, 66 physicians, 80 holds of public office, including one Vice-President of the United States and a United States Treasurer (38). The novel goes on to discuss the 135 books written by Edwards descendants, the one hundred missionaries sent oversees and the owners or superintendents of large coal mines, insurance companies and banks. Cherry best captures the immense impact of the Edwards family on American history when she stated the following: “There is scarcely any great American industry that has not had one of this family among its chief promoters” (38). America has thrived as a nation because of the impact of families such as the Edwardses who were brought up in an environment that encouraged them to embrace responsibility and serve the Lord with their lives.

The level of influence the Edwardses had and continue to have on society is not the result of luck or coincidence. Rather it comes from the abundant blessings that overflow from the Father to His children, who delight in serving Him. Jonathan Edwards heart was rooted in his relationship with Christ and it is from this

foundation that he blessed and led those around him. What began as a small spark soon transformed into a blazing fire as all eleven Edwards children sought to model their father in his passion for Christ and heart dedicated to the service of others. Christ served as the ultimate foundation in the influence of the Edwards family on history. They serve as an example of the innumerable blessings that flow from the Father onto His children when they place Him at the center of their lives. The promise found in Psalm 34 could not be more true of the Edwards family in its promise that those who earnestly seek after the Lord, “lack no good thing” .

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