

Jonathan Edwards and Living a Transformed Life

If I made a list of all the theologians I've seen caricatured, unjustifiably dismissed, or just plain misunderstood, Jonathan Edwards would be near the top. He is perhaps best known for "[Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God](#)," a hellfire-and-brimstone sermon that depicted all humanity suspended above the realm of the dead, completely at the mercy of God's righteous indignation. "You hang by a slender Thread," Edwards spoke to his congregants, "with the Flames of divine Wrath flashing about it, and ready every Moment to singe it, and burn it asunder."

The infamy of that single sermon can cause many of us to consider Edwards, as John Piper [puts](#) it, "a gloomy, sullen, morose, perhaps pathological misanthrope who fell into grotesque religious speech the way some people fall into obscenity." But Edwards' life is filled with wisdom we can apply to our own times and trials, and he has a lot to teach us about living out our values.

Who Edwards Was

In reality, Edwards was much more than a fire-and-brimstone preacher. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" constitutes only a small part of his writings—as a quick glance at his [many sermon titles](#) will prove. And though Edwards faithfully studied and affirmed the doctrines he found in Scripture, those doctrines weren't relegated only to his Sunday pulpit. From the time of his conversion as a late teen, Edwards showed a remarkable intentionality in living out *all* his life to the glory and praise of God.

Thinking Well

Part of Edwards' intentionality resided in his intellect. His sharp mind is evident in his many writings, in which he would often make long, detailed answers to questions some of us may struggle to even comprehend. In [Jonathan Edwards and the Ministry of the Word](#), scholar Douglas A. Sweeney goes so far as to call Edwards the "most influential thinker in all of evangelical history."

Indeed, Edwards had an incredible mind. He began his study of Latin at age 6, and he entered Yale by the time he turned 12, eventually graduating valedictorian of his class. After beginning his master's degree at 17, he made his mark writing on a plethora of philosophical and theological topics. When reading books, too, he often had a pen in hand—not to record the thoughts of others but to note his own ideas and musings. Thus, he was constantly experiencing and analyzing other thinkers, using their perspectives to catalyze and refine his own. His commitment to learning and deep thought is something we can emulate in our own lives by reading from notable thinkers and working to understand their ideas.

Living Well

What I appreciate most about Edwards is his [refusal to divorce mental exercise from his life](#). His thoughts moved faithfully into both his actions and heart. In Edwards' mind, enlightenment constituted a transformation of mind and heart. As he wrote in his sermon "[A Divine and Supernatural Light](#)," "[The spiritually enlightened man] does not merely rationally believe that God is glorious, but he has a sense of the gloriousness of God in his heart." In other words, thinkers should not relegate their thoughts just to the head: One's thoughts and ideas must work themselves out in a person's heart and life.

For Edwards, this meant extreme intentionality in everyday living. In [Jonathan Edwards: A Life](#), George M. Marsden notes that Edwards would often rise as early as 4 a.m. to begin his 13-hour-long workdays. Throughout his work, he'd pray, read, study, prepare sermons, and counsel his parishioners. He aspired to live constantly in the awareness of God's presence, often incorporating intentional fasting and additional prayers into his life. While we may not be called to mimic Edwards' specific practices, we ought to pursue an alignment of our lives with our values—even if it's as simple as being a better family member or friend to someone we know.

Learning from Edwards

Edwards is more than a single fiery sermon can tell us. For, whether or not we agree with the specific tenets of his theology, we can all marvel at Edwards' commitment to constantly align his mind to his life. He was much more than a preacher who plotted out a neat theological ground on Sundays and ignored it the rest of the week; rather, he was a committed student, philosopher, theologian, and Christian who—admirably—drew out his intellect into every aspect of his moral and emotional life.

Edwards' life is a powerful call for us to examine our own lives. Are we working to refine our thinking and ideas, or are we stagnant in our learning? And perhaps more importantly, do our values shine through in our lives, or are they just concepts we claim to believe?

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