

Deuteronomy 15:7-11
August 9, '09

"GOD AT WORK IN THE LIFE OF JONATHAN EDWARDS"

I WON'T ASK FOR A SHOW OF HANDS, BUT I'M GUESSING SOME OF YOU LOOKED AT YOUR NEWSLETTER THIS WEEK OR THE SIGN OUTSIDE AS YOU ARRIVED THIS MORNING OR AT THE SERMON TITLE IN YOUR BULLETIN & WONDERED, "*WHY IN THE WORLD IS THE SERMON GOING TO BE ABOUT A FAILED PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE?*"

OTHERS OF YOU MAY HAVE HAD THIS THOUGHT: "*I REMEMBER THAT JONATHAN EDWARDS SONG FROM THE '70'S - 'SUNSHINE GO AWAY TODAY, I DON'T FEEL MUCH LIKE DANCING,' BUT WHY IS HE THE SUBJECT OF THE SERMON?*"

STILL OTHERS AMONG YOU WERE TAKEN BACK TO YOUR NORTON READER IN HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH & YOU REMEMBER READING THAT INFAMOUS SERMON, "SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD."

BINGO! YOU GET THE PRIZE – SORT OF.

I SAY "BINGO" BECAUSE THAT'S THE JONATHAN EDWARDS TO WHOM WE'RE REFERRING.

I SAY "SORT OF" BECAUSE I'M AFRAID IF THAT'S ALL YOU KNOW ABOUT HIM, YOUR INFORMATION IS SORELY LACKING.

IF YOU REMEMBER ANYTHING AT ALL FROM READING THAT SERMON, IT'S PROBABLY THIS:

"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 MORE ABOMINABLE IN HIS EYES, THAN THE MOST HATEFUL VENOMOUS SERPENT IS IN OURS.

YOU HAVE OFFENDED HIM INFINITELY MORE THAN EVER A STUBBORN REBEL DID HIS PRINCE; AND YET IT IS NOTHING BUT HIS HAND THAT HOLDS YOU FROM FALLING INTO THE FIRE EVERY MOMENT.

IT IS TO BE ASCRIBED TO NOTHING ELSE, THAT YOU DID NOT GO TO HELL THE LAST NIGHT; THAT YOU WERE SUFFERED TO AWAKE AGAIN IN THIS WORLD, AFTER YOU CLOSED YOUR EYES TO SLEEP.

AND THERE IS NO OTHER REASON TO BE GIVEN, WHY YOU HAVE NOT DROPPED INTO HELL SINCE YOU AROSE IN THE MORNING, BUT THAT GOD'S HAND HAS HELD YOU UP.

THERE IS NO OTHER REASON TO BE GIVEN WHY YOU HAVE NOT 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 DO NOT THIS VERY MOMENT DROP DOWN INTO HELL.

O SINNER! CONSIDER THE FEARFUL DANGER YOU ARE IN: IT IS A GREAT FURNACE OF WRATH, A WIDE AND BOTTOMLESS PIT, FULL OF THE FIRE OF WRATH, THAT YOU ARE HELD OVER IN THE HAND OF

THAT GOD, WHOSE WRATH IS PROVOKED AND INCENSED AS MUCH AGAINST YOU, AS AGAINST MANY OF THE DAMNED IN HELL.

YOU HANG BY A SLENDER THREAD, WITH THE FLAMES OF DIVINE WRATH FLASHING ABOUT IT, AND READY EVERY MOMENT TO SINGE IT, AND BURN IT ASUNDER; AND YOU HAVE NO INTEREST IN ANY MEDIATOR, AND NOTHING TO LAY HOLD OF TO SAVE YOURSELF, NOTHING TO KEEP OFF THE FLAMES OF WRATH, NOTHING OF YOUR OWN, NOTHING THAT YOU EVER HAVE DONE, NOTHING THAT YOU CAN DO, TO INDUCE GOD TO SPARE YOU ONE MOMENT.”

NOW THAT MAKES YOU HAPPY TO HAVE GOTTEN UP TO COME TO CHURCH TODAY, DOESN'T IT?!

THESE ARE THE MOST WELL-KNOWN LINES OF THE MOST WELL-KNOWN SERMON EVER PREACHED IN AMERICA.

WHEN BILLY GRAHAM WAS FIRST BEGINNING HIS CAREER AS AN EVANGELIST IN THE LOS ANGELES CRUSADE THAT WOULD PUT HIM IN THE NATIONAL SPOTLIGHT, HE PREACHED THIS SERMON OF JONATHAN EDWARDS TO THAT AUDIENCE.

I IMAGINE IF YOU KNOW ANYTHING AT ALL ABOUT JONATHAN EDWARDS, THIS IS WHAT YOU KNOW.

AND I ALSO IMAGINE YOU HAVE CARICATURIZED HIM AS A WILD, HELLFIRE & BRIMSTONE PREACHER – ALMOST LAUGHABLY PREPOSTEROUS IN HIS PREACHING.

IF THAT'S WHAT YOU'VE ALWAYS THOUGHT, LET ME CORRECT YOUR THINKING.

JONATHAN EDWARDS IS CONSIDERED BY MANY TO BE THE GREATEST THEOLOGIAN IN AMERICAN HISTORY.

HE WAS BORN IN 1703 & DIED IN 1758 – A TIME WHEN THE PERIOD OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT WAS THREATENING THE PURITAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD THAT WAS SO PROMINENT IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE AMERICAN COLONIES.

SOMEHOW, EDWARDS FOUND COMMON GROUND BETWEEN THEM.

HE HAD A VAST KNOWLEDGE OF SCIENCE & PHILOSOPHY.

IT WAS THROUGH HIS MINISTRY THAT THE RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON LABELLED “THE GREAT AWAKENING” WAS BORN.

CONTRARY TO POPULAR BELIEF, THOUGH, JONATHAN EDWARDS WASN'T A WILD, SCREAMING, EMOTIONAL PREACHER.

BY HIS OWN ADMISSION, HIS VOICE WAS NOT AT ALL COMMANDING & HE RARELY USED ANY GESTURES WHEN PREACHING.

HIS SERMONS WERE READ FROM A MANUSCRIPT.

SURPRISINGLY, EDWARDS WAS STRONGLY OPPOSED TO SOME OF THE TECHNIQUES THAT WERE BEING USED BY EVANGELISTS IN THE GREAT AWAKENING.

HE THOUGHT THEY PLAYED ON PEOPLE'S EMOTIONS TOO HEAVILY.

NOW THAT'S RATHER SURPRISING, ISN'T IT, AFTER HEARING THOSE WORDS FROM HIS MOST FAMOUS SERMON?

BUT, YOU SEE, EDWARDS WAS MOVED MORE BY THE GLORIES OF HEAVEN THAN THE HORRORS OF HELL.

HE WAS A STRICT CALVINIST & BELIEVED FIRMLY IN THE POWER OF GOD & THE SINFULNESS OF HUMANITY.

HERE'S HOW THAT UNDERSTANDING CAME ABOUT.

JONATHAN EDWARDS GREW UP IN A FAMILY OF 11 CHILDREN.

THEIR FATHER WAS A MINISTER & SO IT WASN'T UNUSUAL THAT EDWARDS WENT INTO MINISTRY.

HE WAS THE ONLY ONE OF THE 11 TO DO SO, THOUGH.

THE REASON IS BECAUSE ALL 10 OF HIS SIBLINGS WERE SISTERS AND, IN THE 18TH CENTURY, WOMEN DIDN'T BECOME MINISTERS.

ONE DAY, WHEN EDWARDS WAS A TEEN-AGER, HE WAS READING THE BIBLE & HE CAME ACROSS THESE WORDS FROM I TIMOTHY: "*NOW UNTO THE KING ETERNAL, IMMORTAL, INVISIBLE, THE ONLY WISE GOD, BE HONOR & GLORY FOREVER & EVER.*"

HE SAID THESE WORDS STRUCK HIM PROFOUNDLY.

HE SAID, "*I FELT A SENSE OF THE GLORY OF THE DIVINE BEING; A NEW SENSE, QUITE DIFFERENT FROM ANYTHING I HAD EVER EXPERIENCED BEFORE.*"

HE TALKED TO HIS FATHER ABOUT IT & AFTER THEIR CONVERSATION, HE WENT OFF BY HIMSELF TO A SECLUDED PASTURE TO WALK & PRAY.

HE SAID HE LOOKED UP AT THE SKY & CLOUDS & SUDDENLY FELT – AS HE PUT IT – "*...A SWEET SENSE OF THE GLORIOUS MAJESTY & GRACE OF GOD.*"

LISTEN TO THESE WORDS OF EDWARDS TO DESCRIBE HIS FEELING OF THAT *GLORIOUS MAJESTY & GRACE OF GOD*:

"GOD'S EXCELLENCY, HIS WISDOM, HIS PURITY & LOVE, SEEMED TO APPEAR IN EVERYTHING; IN THE SUN, MOON & STARS; IN THE CLOUDS & BLUE SKY; IN THE GRASS, FLOWERS, TREES; IN THE WATER & ALL NATURE."

NOW, SOMEHOW, WE FIND IT HARD TO CONNECT THESE WORDS TO THOSE WORDS WE HEARD EARLIER FROM "SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD."

BUT IF YOU PROPERLY UNDERSTAND THE THINKING & THEOLOGY OF EDWARDS, THEY FIT PERFECTLY.

HE HAD LEARNED THE GLORIES OF HEAVEN & HE WANTED OTHERS TO EXPERIENCE WHAT HE HAD EXPERIENCED.

HE WANTED OTHERS TO BE SAVED FROM THE HORRORS OF HELL & SHARE IN THAT GLORY OF HEAVEN.

AND HERE'S WHERE HIS CALVINIST UNDERSTANDING COMES INTO PLAY.

BUT I WOULD SUGGEST THAT IT ISN'T JUST CALVINIST THINKING – IT'S BIBLICAL THINKING & IT IS PROPER ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN THINKING.

IN THE CONCLUSION OF THAT QUOTE FROM THE SERMON, NOTICE WHAT EDWARDS SAYS:
“NOTHING OF YOUR OWN, NOTHING THAT YOU EVER HAVE DONE, NOTHING THAT YOU CAN DO, TO INDUCE GOD TO SPARE YOU ONE MOMENT.”

THE POINT EDWARDS IS MAKING HERE IS THAT IT IS GOD & GOD ALONE WHO IS ABLE TO SAVE US FROM ETERNAL DEATH & PUNISHMENT.

THERE IS NOTHING YOU CAN DO – NOTHING BUT RELY ON GOD'S LOVE & GRACE & MERCY.

ALL TOO OFTEN, THOUGH, WE TRY TO RELY ON OUR OWN ACTIONS – OR WE TRY TO DENY OUR SINFULNESS.

“I DON'T REALLY NEED GOD. I CAN DO THIS ON MY OWN.”

OR – *“I DON'T NEED THAT MUCH MERCY FROM GOD – NOT AS MUCH AS SOME PEOPLE DO. ALL IN ALL, I'M A PRETTY GOOD PERSON, IF I DO SAY SO MYSELF.”*

THOSE ARE THE ATTITUDES THAT TERRIFIED JONATHAN EDWARDS.

THOSE ARE THE MISCONCEPTIONS OF GOD'S GREATNESS & OUR SINFULNESS THAT KEEP PEOPLE FROM FALLING ON THEIR KNEES IN A DESPERATE PLEA FOR GOD'S FORGIVENESS & GRACE.

LET ME SHARE ONE STORY FROM THE WEDDING WE EXPERIENCED LAST WEEKEND.

IT'S NOT A STORY THAT INVOLVED DREW, THE GROOM.

IT'S NOT A STORY THAT INVOLVED DAVID, THE BEST MAN.

IT'S THE THIRD “D” – DEREK.

ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON, AS WE WERE LEAVING A RESTAURANT AFTER HAVING A NICE FAREWELL LUNCH FOR ABOUT 25 MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY, DEREK UNBUTTONED HIS “CORNER GAS” SHIRT TO REVEAL A T-SHIRT THAT HAD, EMBLAZONED ACROSS THE FRONT – “I'M EVIL.”

WE ALL LOOKED AT IT IN HORROR.

IT SEEMED LIKE SOMETHING YOU'D SEE WORN BY SOMEONE WHO – WELL, SOMEONE OTHER THAN DEREK – A PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER.

I SAID, SOMEWHAT FACETIOUSLY, *“DEREK, THAT REALLY SEEMS TO BE RATHER ODD ATTIRE FOR A MINISTER TO BE WEARING.”*

“DAD, I'M A CALVINIST. I THINK THIS IS PERFECT ATTIRE FOR A MINISTER TO WEAR. IT'S THE FIRST OF THE FIVE POINTS OF CALVINISM.”

AND THEN WE PROCEEDED TO ENGAGE IN MINISTERIAL BANTER.

“YES, DEREK, I KNOW – TOTAL DEPRAVITY. AND IN YOUR CASE, I THINK I’D PUT THE EMPHASIS ON ‘TOTAL.’”

WE DON’T LIKE TO THINK OF OURSELVES IN THAT WAY, THOUGH, DO WE?

AGAIN, I THINK IT’S BECAUSE WE THINK MORE HIGHLY OF OURSELVES THAN WE OUGHT TO – AND NOT AS HIGHLY OF GOD AS WE SHOULD.

YET, THROUGH THE GRACE & MERCY OF GOD – AND *ONLY* THROUGH THE GRACE & MERCY OF GOD - IF WE WILL ACCEPT THAT GRACE & MERCY – WE ARE CAPABLE OF DOING EXTRAORDINARY THINGS.

THIS PASSAGE FROM DEUTERONOMY IS A PASSAGE THAT JONATHAN EDWARDS USED FOR A SERMON ENTITLED *“THE DUTY OF CHARITY TO THE POOR – EXPLAINED & ENFORCED.”*

I THOUGHT OF JUST PREACHING THAT SERMON TODAY.

I PUT IT INTO THE FORMAT THAT I USE FOR MY SERMONS, THOUGH, AND REALIZED IT WOULD BE A PROBLEM.

MY SERMON MANUSCRIPTS ARE USUALLY 13-17 PAGES.

IT WORKS OUT TO ABOUT A PAGE A MINUTE.

THE SERMON OF EDWARDS ON THIS PASSAGE – PUT IN THAT SAME FORMAT – CAME OUT TO MORE THAN 110 PAGES!

DO THE MATH.

JONATHAN EDWARDS’ SERMON ON THIS PASSAGE WOULD BE NEARLY 2 HOURS LONG!

YOU CAN SEE WHY PEOPLE RESPONDED TO HIS PREACHING WITH WAILING, MOURNING & SHRIEKING – WHY THEY COLLAPSED IN A HEAP ON THE FLOOR.

I’M PRETTY SURE IF I PREACHED FOR 2 HOURS, YOU, TOO, WOULD BE WAILING, MOURNING, SHRIEKING & COLLAPSING ON THE FLOOR AS WELL!

THIS PASSAGE IS A CHALLENGE TO ALL OF US AS PEOPLE OF FAITH TO SHARE THE GOODNESS WE HAVE RECEIVED FROM ALMIGHTY GOD.

THERE IS A PROFOUND JOY TO BE EXPERIENCED IN OFFERING TO THOSE IN NEED FROM THE BLESSINGS WE HAVE RECEIVED.

WHAT EDWARDS SAYS ABOUT THIS IS INSTRUCTIVE FOR US TODAY:

“FROM THIS ACCOUNT, THE DOCTRINE IS OBVIOUS, THAT IT IS THE ABSOLUTE AND INDISPENSABLE DUTY OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD, TO GIVE BOUNTIFULLY & WILLINGLY FOR SUPPLYING THE WANTS OF THE NEEDY.

MERELY TO GIVE SOMETHING IS NOT SUFFICIENT.

IT ANSWERS NOT THE RULE, NOR COMES UP TO THE HOLY COMMAND OF GOD.

BUT WE MUST OPEN OUR HAND WIDE.

WHAT WE GIVE, CONSIDERING OUR NEIGHBOR'S WANTS, AND OUR ABILITY, SHOULD BE SUCH AS MAY BE CALLED A LIBERAL GIFT.

THIS IS A DUTY TO WHICH GOD'S PEOPLE ARE UNDER VERY STRICT OBLIGATION.

IT IS NOT MERELY A COMMENDABLE THING FOR A MAN TO BE KIND AND BOUNTIFUL TO THE POOR, BUT OUR BOUNDEN DUTY, AS MUCH A DUTY AS IT IS TO PRAY, OR TO ATTEND PUBLIC WORSHIP, OR ANYTHING ELSE WHATEVER. AND THE NEGLECT OF IT BRINGS GREAT GUILT UPON ANY PERSON.

WHERE HAVE WE ANY COMMAND IN THE BIBLE LAID DOWN IN STRONGER TERMS, AND IN A MORE PEREMPTORY URGENT MANNER, THAN THE COMMAND OF GIVING TO THE POOR?"

JONATHAN EDWARDS WAS A STRICT CALVINIST.

HE BELIEVED IN THE POWER OF GOD.

HE BELIEVED IN THE SINFULNESS OF HUMANITY.

PUTTING THOSE TWO THINGS TOGETHER, HE ALSO BELIEVED THAT WE ARE CAPABLE – THROUGH THE POWER OF GOD – TO DO EXTRAORDINARY THINGS IN GOD'S NAME.

IT IS A JOY – IT IS A TREMENDOUS PRIVILEGE – IT IS OUR "BOUNDEN DUTY" – AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST – TO SERVE OTHERS & MEET THE NEEDS OF THOSE AROUND US.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF JONATHAN EDWARDS TO WHO WE ARE AS A NATION ARE VIRTUALLY INCALCULABLE.

BECAUSE OF HIS TEACHING, HIS PREACHING & HIS WRITING, HE WAS INSTRUMENTAL IN INFLUENCING THOSE WHO EVENTUALLY LED THE ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT & PUT AN END TO SLAVERY IN THIS COUNTRY.

HE SERVED FOR A PERIOD OF TIME AS A MISSIONARY TO NATIVE AMERICANS & CUT ACROSS COLOR & CULTURAL BARRIERS THAT HAD NOT BEEN PREVIOUSLY CROSSED.

CONSIDER THE DESCENDANTS OF JONATHAN EDWARDS.

THEY INCLUDE: 13 COLLEGE PRESIDENTS, 65 COLLEGE PROFESSORS, 3 UNITED STATES SENATORS, 30 JUDGES, 100 LAWYERS, 60 PHYSICIANS, 100 PREACHERS & MISSIONARIES & 60 PROMINENT AUTHORS.

JONATHAN EDWARDS UNDERSTOOD THE HORRORS OF HELL BUT HE REJOICED IN THE GLORIES OF HEAVEN & LIVED EVERY MOMENT OF HIS LIFE IN AN ATTEMPT TO SHARE THAT GLORY WITH OTHERS.

AMEN.

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