

# Jonathan Edwards

## American Puritan theologian and philosopher (1703-1758)

Edwards was born in East Windsor, Connecticut, to Timothy Edwards, pastor of East Windsor, and Esther Edwards. The only son in a family of eleven children, he entered Yale in September, 1716 when he was not yet thirteen and graduated four years later (1720) as valedictorian. He received his Masters three years later.

As a youth, Edwards was unable to accept the Calvinist sovereignty of God. He once wrote, "From my childhood up my mind had been full of objections against the doctrine of God's sovereignty... It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me." However, in 1721 he came to the conviction, one he called a "delightful conviction." He was meditating on 1 Timothy 1:17, and later remarked, "As I read the words, there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from any thing I ever experienced before... I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was, and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be rapt up to him in heaven; and be as it were swallowed up in him for ever!" From that point on, Edwards delighted in the sovereignty of God. Edwards later recognized this as his conversion to Christ.

In 1727 he was ordained minister at Northampton and assistant to his maternal grandfather, Solomon Stoddard. He was a student minister, not a visiting pastor, his rule being thirteen hours of study a day. In the same year, he married Sarah Pierpont, then age seventeen, daughter of James Pierpont (1659–1714), a founder of Yale, originally called the Collegiate School. In total, Jonathan and Sarah had eleven children.

Solomon Stoddard died on February 11th, 1729, leaving to his grandson the difficult task of the sole ministerial charge of one of the largest and wealthiest congregations in the colony. Throughout his time in Northampton his preaching brought remarkable religious revivals. Jonathan Edwards was a key figure in what has come to be called the First Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s.

Yet, tensions flamed as Edwards would not continue his grandfather's practice of open communion. Stoddard, his grandfather, believed that communion was a "converting ordinance." Surrounding congregations had been convinced of this, and as Edwards became more convinced that this was harmful, his public disagreement with the idea caused his dismissal in 1750.

Edwards then moved to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, then a frontier settlement, where he ministered to a small congregation and served as missionary to the Housatonic Indians. There, having more time for study and writing, he completed his celebrated work, *The Freedom of the Will* (1754).

Edwards was elected president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University) in early 1758. He was a popular choice, for he had been a friend of the College since its inception and was the most eminent American philosopher-theologian of his time. On March 22, 1758, he died of fever at the age of fifty-four following experimental inoculation for smallpox and was buried in the President's Lot in the Princeton cemetery beside his son-in-law, Aaron Burr.

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