



RESOLUTIONS

Four Spiritual Challenges for Starting the New Year Right



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Whenever we come to the start of a new year and people begin to speak about New Year's resolutions, my mind races straight to Jonathan Edwards. Considered to be the greatest Protestant thinker America ever produced, Jonathan Edwards formulated the most comprehensive and theologically sound list of spiritual resolutions ever recorded. It covers topics like one's overall life mission, good works, time management, relationships, suffering, character, and the spiritual life.

He was a child prodigy and at the age of ten wrote an essay on the nature of the soul. At thirteen he entered what is now Yale University and graduated Valedictorian of his class in 1720.

Later he became a small-town pastor for twenty-three years in a church of six hundred people, a missionary to Native Americans for seven years, raised eleven faithful children, and worked without the help of electric light, word-processors, quick correspondence, or even sufficient paper to write on. After accepting the presidency of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University), he was inaugurated in 1758, but died five weeks later as the result of an inoculation against the smallpox

epidemic. He was only fifty-four. He died with a library of three hundred books, yet his theological works have ministered for over two hundred years and did more for the missionary movement than anyone of his generation.

Jonathan Edwards was one of the key figures of the Great Awakening in the 18th century in New England, but he was also its most penetrating analyst and critic. His book, *Religious Affections*, is so biblically honest that over two hundred years later it still breaks the hearts of its readers.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones said of him, "No man is more relevant to the present conditions of Christianity than Jonathan Edwards.

How did Jonathan come to this place in life where he needed to make some resolutions?

Stephen Nichols of Ligonier Ministry writes,

"As a young man unsure of his future, Edwards had many gifts and not a few options before him. His father and grandfather were ministers, as were uncles and others in the family tree. He had a first-rate education, one of the finest of the day, so he was well-prepared for a future in the halls of the academy, should he so choose. He even had a penchant for science and perhaps could have headed off in that direction. But for the time being he was a pastor, a young pastor at that. Eighteen going on nineteen, he found himself far from his native soil of the Connecticut River Valley in the throes of a church split in a Presbyterian church in New York City. He had been invited to pastor the minority faction somewhere along the docks of the city's harbor. New York City wasn't nearly as busy in 1722, the year in question, as it is now. The population hovered around just under ten thousand. For a young man from the idyllic setting of small town New England, however, it was a place unlike any he had ever seen.

Amidst all of this uncertainty and flux, this young man, Jonathan Edwards, needed both a place to stand and a compass for some direction. So, he took to writing as fall gave way to winter in 1722. He kept a diary and he penned some guidelines, which he came to call his "Resolutions." These resolutions would supply both that place for him to stand and a compass to guide him as he made his way. These resolutions helped him face this tense moment in his life, this moment of uncertainty and change brought about by a new environment."

Before Edwards got to number one, however, he offered a prefatory word:

"Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God's help, I do humbly entreat Him by His grace to enable me to keep these resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to His will for Christ's sake."

Edwards was a first rank theologian, whose God-entranced worldview was rooted in Scripture. Even in his preface, you hear echoes of John 15:5,

"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."

As well as, Philippians 4:13,

"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."

This was no self-help manual or pull up your boot straps kind of resolve. Nor was it a rigid, puritanical guide. In Resolution 3, he writes,

Resolved, if I ever shall fall and grow dull, so as to neglect to keep any part of these Resolutions, to repent of all I can remember, when I come to myself again.

Edwards grounded himself in the revelation of God's Word and placed his energies only in what would bring glory to God and good to his soul and others. Here are four exhortations from the life of this pastor. Edwards exhorts us:

1. BE SINGLE-MINDED IN YOUR OCCUPATION WITH SPIRITUAL THINGS

Listen to three of his resolutions that he made in 1723, when he was almost twenty years old.

#44. Resolved, that no other end but religion shall have any influence at all in any of my actions; and that no action shall be, in the least circumstance, any otherwise than the religious end will carry it.

#61. Resolved, that I will not give way to that listlessness which I find unbends and relaxes my mind from being fully and fixedly set on religion, whatever excuse I may have for it...

#22. Resolved, to endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness, in the other world, as possibly can, with all the power; might, vigor, and vehemence, yea violence, I am capable of, or can bring myself to exert, in any way that can be thought of.

Edwards exhorts us to a single-minded occupation with God in season and out of season. Edwards calls this effort to know God, "divinity" rather than theology. It is a science far above all other sciences. Listen to what he says we should occupy ourselves with:

God Himself, the eternal Three in one, is the chief object of this science; and next Jesus Christ, as God-man and Mediator, and the glorious work of redemption, the most glorious work that ever was wrought: then the great things of the heavenly world, the glorious and eternal inheritance purchased by Christ, and promised in the Gospel; the work of the Holy Spirit of God on the hearts of men; our duty to God, and the way in which we ourselves may become . . . like God Himself in our measure. All these are objects of this science. (*Works*, II, 159)

2. LABOR EARNESTLY TO KNOW THE SCRIPTURES

Don't get your vision of God secondhand. Don't even let Edwards, Packer, Sproul, or MacArthur be your primary source of divinity. This was the example Edwards himself sets for us. His early biographer, Sereno Dwight, said that when he came to his pastorate in Northampton, "he had studied theology, not chiefly in systems or commentaries, but in the Bible."

Edwards once preached a sermon entitled "*The Importance and Advantage of a Thorough Knowledge of Divine Truth*." In it he said, "Be assiduous in reading the Holy Scriptures. This is the fountain whence all knowledge in divinity must be derived. Therefore, let not this treasure lie by you neglected" (*Works*, II, 162). (*Cf. 2 Tim.2:15*)

He set an amazing example in his own diligence in studying the Bible itself. At Yale's Beinecke library, Edwards' unpublished works are stored along with his interleaved Bible.

He had taken a big Bible apart page by page and inserted a blank sheet of paper between each page and resewn the book together. Then he drew a line down the center of each blank page in order to make two columns for notes. On page after page in the remotest parts of Scripture there are extensive notes and reflections in his tiny almost illegible handwriting. Listen to his 28th Resolution:

Resolved, to study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly, and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive, myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.

How many of us have a plan for growing in our grasp of the whole terrain of Scripture? Do we labor over the Scripture in such a way that we can plainly see that today we understand something in it that we did not understand yesterday? Let me recommend McCheyne's bible reading plan.

3. REDEEM THE TIME AND SERVE GOD WITH AN "ALL IN" SPIRIT

Edwards exhorts us to redeem the time and to do what our hand finds to do with all our might. His 6th resolution was simple and powerful:

Resolved, to live with all my might while I do live.

Resolution #5 was similar:

Resolved, never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can.

He was a great believer in doing what you could in the time you have, rather than putting things off until a more convenient time. Edwards could spend up to thirteen hours a day in his study, because of his decision not to visit his people except when called for. He may even have been wrong in this choice. But we who love what he wrote will not fault him too much.

He rose early, even for those nonelectrical days. In fact, he probably was entirely serious when he wrote in his diary in 1728, "I think Christ has recommended rising early in the morning, by His rising from the grave very early."

It's not easy to know what his family life looked like under this kind of rigorous schedule. Dwight, in his biography on Edwards, says, "In the evening, he usually allowed himself a season of relaxation, in the midst of his family." But in another place Edwards himself says (in 1734 when he was thirty-one years old),

"I judge that it is best, when I am in a good frame for divine contemplation, or engaged in reading the Scriptures, or any study of divine subjects, that, ordinarily, I will not be interrupted by going to dinner, but will forego my dinner, rather than be broke off."

I think it would be fair to say that the indispensable key to raising eleven believing children under these circumstances was an uncommon union with Sarah, who was an uncommon woman.

With regard to his eating habits, not only was he willing to skip dinner for the sake of his study if things were really flowing, he also, Dwight tells us, "carefully observed the effects of the different sorts of food, and selected those which best suited his constitution, and rendered him most fit for mental labor." Edwards had set this pattern when he was twenty-one years old when he wrote in his diary,

By a sparingness in diet, and eating as much as may be what is light and easy of digestion, I shall doubtless be able to think more clearly, and shall gain time; 1. By lengthening out my life; 2. Shall need less time for digestion, after meals; 3. Shall be able to study more closely, without injury to my health; 4. Shall need less time for sleep; 5. Shall more seldom be troubled with the head-ache.

4. STUDY FOR THE SAKE OF HEARTFELT WORSHIP AND PRACTICAL OBEDIENCE

The final exhortation is to recover that "logic on fire" as the Puritans called it—on fire with joy and obedience. Edwards did not pursue a passion for God because it was icing on the cake of faith. For him *faith* was grounded in a sense of God, which was more than what reason alone could deliver. He said,

A true sense of the glory of God is that which can never be obtained by speculative [reasoning]; and if men convince themselves by argument that God is holy, that never will give a sense of His amiable and glorious holiness. If they argue that He is very merciful, that will not give a sense of His glorious grace and mercy. It must be a more immediate, sensible discovery that must give the mind a real sense of the excellency and beauty of God.

In other words, it is to no avail merely to believe *that* God is holy and merciful. For that belief to be of any saving value, we must "sense" God's holiness and mercy. That is, we must have a true delight in it for what it is in itself. Otherwise the knowledge is no different than what the devils have. John Piper said,

"The great end of all study—all theology—is a heart for God and a life of holiness. The great goal of all Edwards' work was the glory of God. And the greatest thing I have ever learned from Edwards...is that God is glorified most not merely by being known, nor by merely being dutifully obeyed, but by being enjoyed in the knowing and the obeying." (*God's Passion for His Glory*, p.75)

And so, the final and most important exhortation to us from the life and work of Jonathan Edwards is this: in all your study and ministry seek to glorify God by enjoying Him forever.

The enjoyment of God is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows; but God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams. But God is the ocean. (*Works*, II, 244)

End notes:

Nathan Busenitz of the Master Seminary squeezed the seventy resolutions down to ten. Here are the primary areas in which Jonathan Edwards was resolved.

1. To live for God's glory (*1 Cor.10:31*)
2. To make the most of this life, in terms of eternal impact (*Eph.5:15-17*)
3. To take sin seriously (*Rom.6:23*)
4. To become more theologically astute (*2 Tim.2:15*)
5. To be humble (*Matt.17:28-30; James 4:6*)
6. To exhibit self-control in all things (*Gal.5:22-23*)
7. To always speak with grace and truth (*Tit.2:7-8; Eph.4:15, 29; Col.4:6*)
8. To constantly develop an eternal focus (*1 John 2:10-13*)
9. To be a faithful Christian, in prayer and dedication (*Rom.12:10-13*)
10. To daily pursue a fervent love for Christ (*Eph.2:1-7; John 14:15*)

Here are 5 challenges from a different angle.

1. Put first things first. (*Matt.6:33*)
2. Leave old things behind. (*Phil.3:13*)
3. Address needful things now. (*Prov.14:23*)
4. Renew your understanding of God's will devotionally.
5. Present your life to God completely. (*Rom.12:1*)

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