

“The Most Famous Sermon in American History”

- **The Place:** Enfield, CT
- **The Date:** July 8, 1741
- **The Preacher:** Jonathan Edwards
- **The Title:** Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God
- **The Text:** “Their foot shall slide in due time”
(Deuteronomy 32:35)

The audience was deeply stirred; many cried out for mercy; 500 were reported saved. Although a *brilliant* scholar and a prodigious writer and thinker, Jonathan Edwards was hardly a “dynamic” speaker. On this occasion he actually read his text from pre-written notes. He always aimed, in his preaching, to appeal to the mind, and not to encourage outbursts of emotion. All of his sermons were delivered in the same calm fashion — but with unassailable logic and penetrating force. When the people listening that day in Enfield cried out for mercy, and Edwards could not be heard for the commotion, he stopped and requested that they be quiet to hear the rest of the sermon, and refrain from weeping and crying out.

Who was Jonathan Edwards? And why did he have such a great longing to see men and women saved by God’s grace?

He was born in 1703 (the same year as John Wesley) in East Windsor, CT. He was a very intelligent child and entered Yale at the age of 12. While there (1716–20), he came into contact with the “new” 17th century skepticism, a period of time often called by historians “The Age of Reason.” Biblical truths like the sinfulness of man, the need for conversion, and the atoning work of Christ were being rejected. But Edwards saw through the fallacy of these ideas and, in the spring of 1721, he trusted Christ.

In 1734, he gave a series of sermons on “Justification by Faith” in Northampton, MA. He wrote that by December of that year *“the Spirit of God began extraordinarily to set in and wonderfully to work among us ... the Number of true Saints multiplied, [and it] soon made a glorious Alteration in the Town; so that in the spring and summer following, Anno 1735, the Town seemed to be full of the Presence of God; it was never so full of Love, nor of Joy, and yet so full of distress, as it was then. There were remarkable Tokens of God’s Presence in almost every House. It was a time of Joy in families on account of Salvation being brought unto them.... More than 300 Souls were savingly brought home to Christ, in this Town, in the Space of half a Year.... I hope that by far the greater Part of persons in this Town, above sixteen Years of age, are such as have the saving Knowledge of Jesus Christ.”*

Earlier sparks of revival had appeared in New Jersey, where Theodorus Frelinghuysen and William and Gilbert Tennent were attempting to arouse people out of spiritual lethargy. Then God began to work mightily in Massachusetts and Connecticut. By 1740, the Great Awakening swept across New England, aided by the visit of George Whitefield. This was the first event in North American history to stir people of several colonies with a common religious concern. It has been estimated that as many as **50,000 people were awakened and trusted Christ**. (This was at a time when the total population of the colonies was about one million. A proportionate result today in the United States would be the conversion of over 15 million Americans!) While there had been awakenings here and there in New England previously, never had so many towns been involved at once. Gospel preachers emphasized the individual’s responsibility towards God and the necessity of conversion – that outward morality was not enough for salvation. An inward change, a new birth, was necessary. The idea was not new in Christianity, but here it received a dramatic new emphasis.

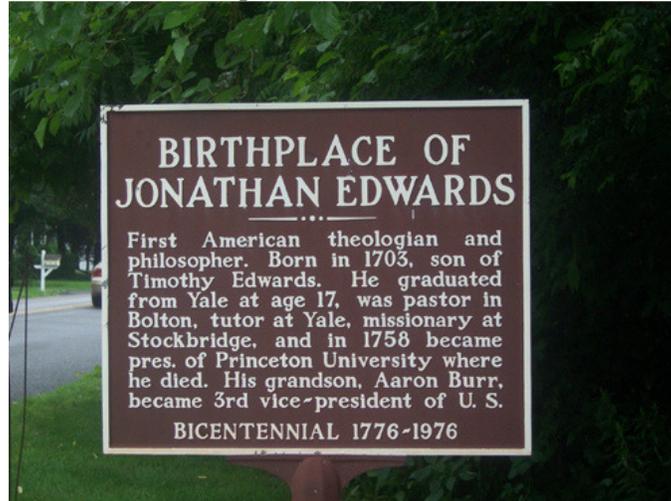
A movement of such importance needs someone to explain it and interpret it, both for his own times and for later generations. The great interpreter of the Awakening was Jonathan Edwards. He kept a careful written account of his observations, penning, among other titles, *Inquiry on the Freedom of the Will; A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections; A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God; Distinguishing Marks of the Work of the Spirit of God; Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival; and The Diary of David Brainerd*. He also wrote close to 1000 sermons. Yale has published more than 26 **volumes** of his writings. Jonathan Edwards produced one of the most thorough bodies of theological writing in the history of America.

Modern English classes study his most famous sermon and imagine him as a cold, severe, heartless person. Actually, he preached far more about heaven and the joy of salvation than he did about hell. He was a devoted husband, the

proud father of eleven children, and a tireless letter-writer whose favorite words had more to do with the love of God than His wrath. Edwards insisted that believers should *expect* joy from their religion. "*It would be worth the while to be religious,*" he preached in one of his favorite sermons, on Proverbs 24:13-14, "*if it were only for the pleasantness of it.*" He enjoyed long walks in the Massachusetts woodlands and saw all nature as an evidence of a beautiful, loving, creator God.

In 1758 he was inaugurated as President of the College of New Jersey (Princeton). Later that year, he died from an inoculation to ward off smallpox. He is buried in Princeton Cemetery, Princeton, NJ.

Historic Marker at the birthplace of Jonathan Edwards, East Windsor, CT



Historic Marker at the site where he preached his mightily-used sermon, Enfield, CT

