

Introduction



God's work wonderfully broke forth among us, and souls began to flock to Christ as the Saviour in whose righteousness alone they hoped to be justified.¹

That is how Jonathan Edwards (1703–58) described the remarkable progress of the gospel in Northampton, New England, in 1734. Many were overjoyed at what they regarded as a glorious work of God. Others were horrified, regarding it all as dangerous fanaticism. When Edwards later set out to analyse the true and the false in revival, his own wife's experience provided him with a remarkable case study of the genuine work of the Spirit. Sarah (1710–58) provided him with a lived-out illustration of the reality of God's love.

Jonathan and Sarah Edwards lived in Massachusetts, one of the New England colonies. Jonathan is remembered as a leader in the First Great Awakening, and as a great theologian and philosopher. In the past he has been unfairly characterised as a harsh preacher, whose best-known sermon was 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God'. In the present, for some, the fact that he owned slaves negates the value of his legacy.² But

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we should not so quickly dismiss his ministry. Indeed, the central theme was the beauty, the glory and the love of God.

When I was a young teenager, I picked up a small booklet at a conference bookstall entitled *Heaven: A World of Love*.³ At thirteen pence, it was within my budget. I bought it, read it and was gripped by the power and energy of the description of the beauty of God. That was my first encounter with Jonathan Edwards. From that time on, I knew that our greatest joy is to be found in God.

Nearly 20 years ago, I wrote a book entitled *In Trouble and In Joy*, which looked at the lives of four women, including Sarah Edwards. I have often returned to her detailed description of the three weeks in 1742 when God met with her in an extraordinary way. As well as an account of her life, this book includes, in full, her first-hand account of what happened during those three weeks (chapter 6).⁴

This is not merely of historic interest. God doesn't change. Sarah's testimony encourages us today to pray, and work, for revival, personal and communal.

*Blessed be his glorious name forever,
May the whole earth be filled with his glory.
(Psalm 72:19)*

Sharon James
London, 2022



The setting

The Pilgrim Fathers disembarked from the *Mayflower* at Cape Cod in November 1620, the first of many thousands of English Puritans to settle around Massachusetts Bay. These were people who had left family and friends behind them, and travelled at risk of their lives into the unknown. For them, worshipping God was the most important thing in life. God should be worshipped in the way he has laid down in Scripture, and they refused to be forced into what they regarded as false worship. In his classic account, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, William Bradford described their situation:

When by the zeal of some godly preachers, and God's blessing on their labours, many in the North of England and other parts became enlightened by the word of God

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and had their ignorance and sins discovered to them, and began by His grace to reform their lives and pay heed to their ways, the work of God was no sooner manifest in them than they were scorned by the profane multitude, and their ministers were compelled to subscribe or be silent, and the poor people were persecuted ... they bore it all for several years in patience, until by the increase of their troubles they began to see further things by the light of the word of God. They realized not only that these base ceremonies were unlawful, but also that the tyrannous power of the prelates [Bishops] ought not to be submitted to, since it was contrary to the freedom of the gospel and would burden men's consciences and thus profane the worship of God ... Those reformers who saw the evil of these things, and whose hearts the Lord had touched with heavenly zeal for his truth, shook off this yoke of anti-Christian bondage, and as the Lord's free people joined themselves together by covenant as a church, in the fellowship of the gospel to walk in all his ways ... whatever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them. But after these things, they could not long continue in any peaceable condition, but were hunted and persecuted on every side, so as their former afflictions were but as flea-bitings in comparison of those which now came upon them. For some were taken and clapt up in prison; others had their houses beset and watched night and day, and hardly escaped their hands, and the most were fain to flee and leave their houses and habitations, and the means of their livelihoods.¹

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Fleeing from religious persecution in the Old World, they hoped to set up a godly nation in the New. Each town was built around the Congregational Church, and only church members could hold any civic position. Living a century after the arrival of these first settlers, Sarah and Jonathan Edwards were to be caught up in the tension caused as the growing population could not forever keep up this ideal of the Christian community.

By the 1700s, there were 13 small British colonies hugging the coast of the Atlantic. Jonathan and Sarah Edwards lived before Independence, and regarded themselves as British. The greater part of their life was spent in Northampton, a town of just over 1,000 inhabitants in the Connecticut River Valley. Its situation was pleasant: sheltered, with fertile land and beautiful scenery. It was also dangerous. Northampton was in a frontier area, continually vulnerable to attack, especially at times when England was at war with France: a conflict that spilled over from Europe to the colonies of both nations.

When Jonathan was born in 1703, the 'Sun King', Louis XIV of France, was still using military might to expand his territories. He was also brutally persecuting Protestants within his realm. In North America, the French encouraged Indians to attack English settlers. The year after Jonathan's birth, the infamous Deerfield massacre took place, just 50 miles north of where he was brought up in East Windsor. A joint French-Indian attack left 39 out of 300 inhabitants dead, and 112 taken prisoner. The victims included members of Jonathan's extended family: six-week-old Jerusha and six-year-old John died in the initial attack, their mother, Jonathan's relative, was killed when she could not keep up with

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the forced trek through deep snow to Canada, and their father and remaining siblings were kept captive in Canada.² Such memories were still fresh when Jonathan and Sarah started married life in Northampton 23 years later. Deerfield, the scene of that massacre, was just 16 miles away.

Nearly all the families worked the land. Men rose at dawn to work in the fields, or at the constant tasks of felling and cutting wood (for homes, furniture and fuel). Households were virtually self-sufficient. Many women wove cloth and made nearly all the goods needed by the family. There was only one general store for basic necessities. Occasional trips down to Boston or New York would be necessary for the purchase of other commodities. There was no mail service and no stagecoach. If you did have to travel, you travelled on horseback along the roughest of roads.

Life was hard, but sociable. The settlers chose to live close together, which ensured a tight-knit community life, with the church and school as the focal points. Nearly all the settlers would attend church. All men were expected to co-operate in the defence of the community. Each town was self-governing, a little democracy governed by the town hall meeting. The crime rate was virtually zero.

There was a marked gap between the wealthy and the poor. Church seating was determined by social status and society was strongly hierarchical. It was assumed that servants could be bought, sold and hired out to others.³ A few (such as the Edwards' close friend Samuel Hopkins) viewed slavery as a horrible evil to be opposed. The majority, including Jonathan and Sarah, accepted it as part of the social structure of the day.⁴ However, Jonathan was firmly convinced that:

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*In these two things, are contained the most forceable reasons against the master's abuse of his servant: That both have one Maker, and that their Maker made them alike with the same nature.*⁵

Jonathan came to the point where he absolutely opposed the slave trade. He preached against any mistreatment of slaves. He regarded them as spiritually equal and was one of the first ministers to admit them to full church membership. His son, Jonathan Edwards Jr became a leading abolitionist, and used his father's writings to justify his stance. If Jonathan and Sarah had lived one generation later, they probably would have stood with their son on this issue.

Questions for reflection

1. During the seventeenth century, those who fled from England for conscientious reasons were determined 'to walk in all his [the Lord's] ways ... whatever it should cost them'. What motivates our decisions?
2. We shouldn't dismiss the legacy of people in the past when we disagree with some elements of their life. How can we cultivate gratitude for Christian leaders, while also being realistic about their limitations and failings?



Childhood: ‘Joy unspeakable’

Sarah was born in 1710 in New Haven. Her father was a well-known minister, James Pierpont. Her mother, Mary (née Hooker), was the daughter and granddaughter of leading ministers. Sarah’s family was one of the wealthiest and most respected in the colony. One of her great-grandfathers was Thomas Hooker, a founder of Connecticut, another was the first mayor of New York.

Sarah was four years old when her father died. Her mother stayed on in the church where he had ministered for the preceding 30 years. All descriptions of Sarah testify that she was beautiful, but more remarkable was her godliness, it is said that she ‘exhibited the life and power of religion, and that in a remarkable manner, when only five years old’.¹

She was only eight when Jonathan Edwards arrived in New Haven to study at the fledgling Yale College (of which

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her father had been one of the founders). Sarah's widowed mother had a prominent seat in the church, and it may have been in church that Jonathan first met this extraordinary child.

Five years later, in 1723, when Sarah was 13 and Jonathan 20, he penned the description of her that has passed into history. She delighted, he said, to walk alone in the country and think of God. She knew that this Creator God loved her personally and feared more than anything else to offend him. She loved to sing to God, and was often full of joy, sometimes unspeakable joy.

They say there is a young lady in New Haven who is loved by that Great Being, who made and rules the world, and that there are certain seasons in which this Great Being, in some way or other invisible, comes to her and fills her mind with exceeding sweet delight; and that she hardly cares for anything except to meditate on him ... She has a strange sweetness in her mind, and a singular purity in her affections, is most just and conscientious in her conduct, and you could not persuade her to do anything wrong or sinful if you would give her half the world, lest she should offend this Great Being. She is of a wonderful sweetness, calmness and universal benevolence of mind ... She will sometimes go about from place to place, singing sweetly, and seems always to be full of joy and pleasure and no one knows for what. She loves to be alone, walking in the fields and groves, and seems to have someone invisible always conversing with her.²

Jonathan was enthralled, for he had discovered a kindred spirit. From an early age, he too had loved to wander alone in

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the woods and pray. He thought deeply about God, just as he thought deeply about everything. As a young tutor at Yale, he thought and wrote like a mature professor. No ordinary girl could have suited him, but Sarah was extraordinary. She was not disturbed by the profundity of his religious experience, for she shared it. She was not intimidated by his intellect – she too had received an excellent education. They were engaged when Sarah was just 15.³ They shared a love of music and singing. They both admired the works of Isaac Watts (1674–1748), who had been revolutionising the enjoyment of public worship among the English dissenters, with his prolific compositions of hymns, and his renderings of Psalms (always viewed through the lens of the coming of Christ).⁴

A section from one of Sarah's diaries has been found, dated 22 October 1735. Written when she was 25 or so, she reflected on the way God had worked in her life when she was around 16:

About nine years ago, I was led to see my danger of eternal destruction, but I had a resolution given me to seek for mercy ... The words, 'Though he slay me, yet will I put my trust in him', often occurred to my mind. Not long after this, Isaiah 44:4–6 seemed to be God's call to me: 'This one will say, "I am the Lord's," another will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, "The Lord's," and name himself by the name of Israel.'

The next Sabbath I was led to prize nearness to Christ as the creature's greatest happiness. My soul thirsted for him, so that death seemed nothing to me, that I might be

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with him; for he was altogether lovely. This frame of mind continued for some time.

The winter after, I had a greater sense of my own vileness than ever. I could truly say 'I abhorred myself and repented in dust and ashes.' It was not on account of the evil which sin would bring up on me, but because it dishonoured God. This view of sin had a great tendency to humble me, and to incline me to go to God for pardon. I had great confidence in my love to Christ, and was not afraid to appeal to him ... I loved Christ for what he was in himself; I loved him in all his offices; I saw my absolute need of him in all his offices,⁵ and I thought I was as willing to be ruled by his laws as to be saved by his merits. I found a disposal to go to God as to a father. A soul-emptying and God-exalting way of being saved was what I greatly delighted in. The thoughts of my heart were, 'What have I that I have not received?' and 'Who hath made me to differ?' I felt a great love to the people of God, even if they were persons whom I had before disliked ... For half a year after I had very little fear of death ... It seemed almost impossible, that I should ever be in the least uneasy at anything I might meet with in the world; for all things were at the disposal of God.⁶

Sarah was already experiencing a deep desire that God should be glorified, and a profound sense of her need of Christ as her personal Saviour. She was convinced of the absolute sovereignty of God. In the light of that, she did not have to fear the future. At the age of 16, she was already convinced that 'nearness to Christ' is the greatest joy anyone can ever

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know. She knew that death, whenever it might come, would mean that she would finally be with Christ, the One who is 'altogether lovely'.

Questions for reflection:

1. 'I was led to prize nearness to Christ as the creature's greatest happiness.' Do you find joy in fellowship with the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit?
2. There are many examples in church history of children and teenagers demonstrating a profound knowledge of God. How do you think we might be in danger of underestimating the spiritual capacity of young people? Pray about how you could offer spiritual encouragement to the children and young people known to you.