

18 QUOTATIONS



Jonathan Edwards

(1703-1758)

Jonathan Edwards is the greatest American theologian, both a Calvinist mystic and a scientist. As a minister in Massachusetts he wrote “Personal Narrative” in response to the Great Awakening of the 1730s, in which many people had what Edwards regarded as superficial religious experiences they were mistaking for “true conversion.” In his personal narrative he differentiates his religious experiences in boyhood from his true conversion later in maturity, which included emotional acceptance of Calvinist doctrines, the head unified with the heart and soul. In the process, he renders his psychological individuation in accord with the archetypal pattern, images and motifs evident in works by many later writers including Modernists and even the Sioux Indian Black Elk. What is most surprising about Edwards as a Calvinist is his emphasis on pastoralism and feelings. Subtract the theology and he is very close to the pantheistic Emerson in his ecstatic perceptions and relation to Nature. His insistence on “true conversion” as a requirement for taking communion in the church led his lax congregation to kick him out of his pulpit in 1750.

ORDER OF TOPICS: childhood affections, God’s sovereignty, epiphany, ineffability, pastoralism, transfiguration, true grace, desire for rebirth, dedication, wilderness retreat, spiritual death, acceptance of doctrines, union with Christ, Transcendental consciousness, innate depravity, humility, God’s will be done:

from “Personal Narrative” (1739)

CHILDHOOD AFFECTIONS

I had a variety of concerns and exercises about my soul from my childhood... I used to pray five times a day in secret, and to spend much time in religious talk with other boys; and used to meet with them to pray together.... I with some of my schoolmates joined together, and built a booth in a swamp, in a very retired spot, for a place of prayer. And besides, I had particular secret places of my own in the woods, where I used to retire by myself; and was from time to time much affected. My affections seemed to be lively and easily moved... And I am ready to think, many are *deceived with such affections*, and such a kind of delight as I then had in religion, and *mistake it for grace*.... [emphasis added]

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

I made seeking my salvation the main business of my life.... From my childhood up, my mind had been full of objections against the doctrine of God's sovereignty, in choosing whom he would to eternal life, and rejecting whom he pleased; leaving them eternally to perish, and be everlastingly tormented in hell. It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me...now I saw further, and my reason apprehended the justice and reasonableness of it... And there has been a wonderful alteration in my mind, in respect to the doctrine of God's sovereignty... The doctrine has very often appeared exceedingly pleasant, bright, and sweet. Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God....

EPIPHANY

The first instance that I remember of that sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things that I have lived much in since, was on reading those words (I *Tim.* 1.17): *Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory for ever and ever, Amen.* 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!... But it never came into my thought, that there was any thing spiritual, or of a saving nature in this....

INEFFABILITY

This I know not how to express otherwise, than by a calm, sweet abstraction of soul from all the concerns of this world; and sometimes a kind of vision, or fixed ideas and imaginations, of being alone in the mountains, or some solitary wilderness, far from all mankind, sweetly conversing with Christ, and wrapt and swallowed up in God. The sense I had of divine things, would often of a sudden kindle up, as it were, a sweet burning in my heart; an ardor of soul, that I know not how to express....

PASTORALISM

...I walked abroad alone, in a solitary place in my father's pasture, for contemplation. And as I was walking there, and looking up on the sky and clouds, there came into my mind so sweet a sense of the glorious *majesty* and *grace* of God, that I know not how to express. I seemed to see them both in a sweet conjunction; majesty and meekness joined together; it was a sweet, and gentle, and holy majesty; and also a majestic meekness; an awful sweetness; a high, and great, and holy gentleness....

TRANSFIGURATION

The appearance of every thing was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything. God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in every thing; in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds, and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind.... And scarce any thing, among all the works of nature, was so sweet to me as thunder and lightning; formerly, nothing had been so terrible to me. Before, I used to be uncommonly terrified with thunder, and to be struck with terror when I saw a thunder storm rising; but now, on the contrary, it rejoiced me. I felt God, so to speak, at the first appearance of a thunder storm... While thus engaged, it always seemed natural to me to sing, or chant for my meditations; or, to speak my thoughts in soliloquies with a singing voice....

TRUE GRACE

The delights which I now felt in the things of religion, were of an exceeding different kind from those before mentioned, that I had when a boy; and what I then had no more notion of, than one born blind has of pleasant and beautiful colors. They were of a more inward, pure, soul animating and refreshing nature. Those former delights *never reached the heart*; and did not arise from any sight of the divine excellency of the things of God... I felt a burning desire to be in every thing a complete Christian; and conformed to the

blessed image of Christ; and that I might live, in all things, according to the pure, sweet and blessed rules of the gospel...becoming a child of God, and a disciple of Christ... [emphasis added]

My experience had not then taught me, as it has done since, my extreme feebleness and impotence, every manner of way; and the bottomless depths of secret corruption and deceit there was in my heart.... The inward ardor of my soul, seemed to be hindered and pent up, and could not freely flame out as it would.... Heaven appeared exceedingly delightful, as a world of love; and that all happiness consisted in living in pure, humble, heavenly, divine love....

DESIRE FOR REBIRTH

Holiness...made the soul like a field or garden of God, with all manner of pleasant flowers; all pleasant, delightful, and undisturbed; enjoying a sweet calm, and the gently vivifying beams of the sun. The soul of a true Christian, as I then wrote my meditations, appeared like such a little white flower as we see in the spring of the year; low and humble on the ground, opening its bosom to receive the pleasant beams of the sun's glory; rejoicing as it were in a calm rapture; diffusing around a sweet fragrance; standing peacefully and lovingly, in the midst of other flowers round about; all in like manner opening their bosoms, to drink in the light of the sun... My heart panted after this, to lie low before God, as in the dust; that I might be nothing, and that God might be ALL, that I might become as a little child...

DEDICATION

On January 12, 1723, I made a solemn dedication of myself to God, and wrote it down, giving up myself, and all that I had to God...engaging to fight with all my might, against the world, the flesh, and the devil, to the end of my life. But I have reason to be infinitely humbled, when I consider, how much I have failed, of answering my obligation....

WILDERNESS RETREAT

I very frequently used to retire into a solitary place, on the banks of Hudson's River, at some distance from the city, for contemplation on divine things and secret converse with God; and had many sweet hours there.... I had then, and at other times, the greatest delight in the holy scriptures, of any book whatsoever. Oftentimes in reading it, every word seemed to touch my heart. I felt a harmony between something in my heart, and those sweet and powerful words. I seemed often to see so much light exhibited by every sentence...almost every sentence seemed to be full of wonders....

SPIRITUAL DEATH

After I went to Newhaven, I sunk in religion... In September, 1725, I was taken ill at Newhaven, and while endeavouring to go home to Windsor, was so ill at the North Village, that I could go no further; where I lay sick, for about a quarter of a year. In this sickness, God was pleased to visit me again, with the sweet influences of his Spirit....

ACCEPTANCE OF DOCTRINES

The doctrines of God's absolute sovereignty, and free grace, in showing mercy; and man's absolute dependence on the operations of God's Holy Spirit, have very often appeared to me as sweet and glorious doctrines.... I have loved the doctrines of the gospel; they have been to my soul like green pastures....

UNION WITH CHRIST

It has often appeared to me delightful, to be united to Christ; to have him for my head, and to be a member of his body; also to have Christ for my teacher and prophet. I very often think with sweetness, and longings, and pantings of soul, of being a little child, taking hold of Christ, to be led by him through the wilderness of this world.... I love to think of coming to Christ, to receive salvation of him, poor in spirit, and quite empty of self, humbly exalting him alone; cut off entirely from my own root, in order to grow into, and out of Christ.... And God has appeared glorious to me, on account of the Trinity. It has made me have exalting thoughts of God, that he subsists in three persons; Father, Son and Holy Ghost....

TRANSCENDENT CONSCIOUSNESS

Once, as I rode out into the woods for my health, in 1737, having alighted from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer, I had a view that for me was extraordinary, of the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man, and his wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condescension.... The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception...which continued as near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud. I felt an ardency of soul to be what I know not otherwise how to express, emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust, and to be full of Christ alone; to love him with a holy and pure love; to trust in him; to live upon him; to serve and follow him; and to be perfectly sanctified and made pure, with a divine and heavenly purity... God, in the communications of his Holy Spirit, has appeared as an infinite fountain of divine glory and sweetness...like the sun in its glory...

INNATE DEPRAVITY

Often, since I lived in this town, I have had very affecting views of my own sinfulness and vileness; very frequently to such a degree as to hold me in a kind of loud weeping, sometimes for a considerable time together; so that I have often been forced to shut myself up.... My wickedness, as I am in myself, has long appeared to me perfectly ineffable, and swallowing up all thought and imagination; like an infinite deluge, or mountain over my head. I know not how to express better what my sins appear to me to be, than by heaping infinite upon infinite, and multiplying infinite by infinite.... When I look into my heart; and take a view of my wickedness, it looks like an abyss infinitely deeper than hell....

HUMILITY

It seems to me, that though their degrees of humility may be suitable for them, yet it would be a vile selfexaltation in me, not to be the lowest in humility of all mankind....'to lie infinitely low before God.' And it is affecting to think, how ignorant I was, when a young Christian, of the bottomless, infinite depths of wickedness, pride, hypocrisy and deceit, left in my heart.... The very thought of any joy arising in me, on any consideration of my own amiableness, performances, or experiences, or any goodness of heart or life, is nauseous and detestable to me. And yet I am greatly afflicted with a proud and selfrighteous spirit, much more sensibly than I used to be formerly. I see that serpent rising and putting forth its head continually, everywhere, all around me....

GOD'S WILL BE DONE

I had, at the same time, a very affecting sense, how meet and suitable it was that God should govern the world, and order all things according to his own pleasure; and I rejoiced in it, that God reigned, and that his will was done.

