



The Unwavering Resolve of

Jonathan Edwards

STEVEN J. LAWSON



A Long Line of Godly Men Profile

ENDORSEMENTS

“The pursuit of a regimented godliness is not unique to Christianity, but it is rare. Unlike popular versions of the Christian faith, Jonathan Edwards did not seek the disciplines of godliness for utilitarian ends, the self-help preoccupation of Western Christianity. He saw conformity to Christ as a means, the only means, to glorify God. Steve Lawson has done a wonderful service, producing in a tactful and pastoral manner Edwards’ pious resolutions, thereby helping us understand the inner life, the spiritual struggles and goals, of perhaps America’s greatest intellect.”

—DR. JOHN D. HANNAH

Research professor of theological studies
and distinguished professor of historical theology,
Dallas Theological Seminary

“Tired of going at the Christian life in piecemeal fashion? Tired of half-hearted pursuits? Then you’ve come to the right book. Here Steven Lawson artfully points you to Jonathan Edwards, a model for pursuing holiness, humility, and love, and for the forsaking of sin—all driven by a relentless passion ‘to glorify God and enjoy him forever.’ When Edwards wrote his ‘Resolutions,’ he likely had no idea how much they would impact his life. Beware, they’ll do the same for you.”

—DR. STEPHEN J. NICHOLS

President, Reformation Bible College
Sanford, Fla.

“The growing embrace of Reformed thought in the past quarter of a century has been very encouraging to those of us who delight in this most biblical expression of Christianity. And the remarkable writings of Jonathan Edwards have, by the grace of God, played no little part in this expansion of Reformed theology. This new volume by Steve Lawson helps to locate the root of Edwards’ thinking in his close walk with God. It serves as a powerful reminder that Reformed orthodoxy and Reformed piety belong together, and that to focus on the former at the expense of the latter is not only un-Edwardsean, but also un-biblical.”

—DR. MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN
Professor of church history and biblical spirituality,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, Ky.

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Jonathan
Edwards

The Long Line of Godly Men Profiles

Series editor, Steven J. Lawson

The Expository Genius of John Calvin

by Steven J. Lawson

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A **Long Line of Godly Men** Profile

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Jonathan Edwards

STEVEN J. LAWSON



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This book is dedicated to the two lead elders with whom I serve at Christ Fellowship Baptist Church in Mobile, Alabama:

Tom Gibson
and
Danny Chance

These faithful men have stood by my side since God first planted the church we are now privileged to serve and oversee. Like Jonathan Edwards, they are marked by unwavering resolve in their pursuit of personal holiness and in their shepherding of the flock of God. Heaven one day will reveal their fixed determination to do God's work God's way for God's glory. Until then, may you know of their diligent ministry.

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

(1 COR. 15:58, NASB)

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The Pursuit of Holiness

Living the Christian life, by all biblical accounts, necessitates the passionate pursuit of personal holiness. Sanctification is never an elective course that a believer may or may not take. Neither is it an upper-level graduate study, required for only a few disciples. Instead, it is a core class, mandated for all Christians. Godliness is a lifelong study, for no one graduates from the school of Christ this side of heaven.

Progress in personal holiness is absolutely crucial. The Bible says, “Pursue . . . sanctification without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14, NASB). In other words, the path that leads to heaven must lead first to holiness. Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). Growth in godliness marks *all* who are on the narrow path that leads to life.

To be sure, this pursuit necessitates self-discipline. The

apostle Paul wrote, “I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:27, NASB). In the ancient games, an athlete who failed to meet basic training requirements could not participate at all, much less win the crown. In the same way, the believer who fails to buffet his body and bring it into submission is put out of the race. If one fails to exercise self-control, he forfeits the prize.

The apostle is not saying that such an undisciplined believer will lose his salvation, for such is impossible. Scripture clearly affirms the eternal security of the believer. Rather, the undisciplined disciple loses personal joy, spiritual power, and, ultimately, eternal reward (1 Cor. 3:15). To win the prize, all believers must “lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us . . . [and] run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1, NASB). Simply put, “No pain, no gain.”

Paul reinforces this challenge with these words: “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (1 Tim. 4:7, NASB). By this exhortation, Paul called for the kind of strict training that a champion athlete undergoes in order to gain the crown. In the Christian life, rigorous discipline, motivated and enabled by grace, is required of all on the path to victory. Spiritual sluggards, beware!

In light of these biblical teachings, it is astounding how many professing believers are slack regarding the self-discipline needed for growth in godliness. We live in a day of spiritual

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laxity. Many who confess Christ are pampering themselves to death rather than pushing themselves to holiness. Their spiritual muscles are untrained and unfit. Their wills are soft and unresolved.

This is why a study of the life of Jonathan Edwards is so valuable. Considered *the* towering figure in American Colonial church history—arguably the greatest pastor, preacher, philosopher, theologian, and author America has ever produced—Edwards lived with an enlarged desire to experience personal godliness. In this pursuit, he became a model of discipline worthy of our emulation.

As an eighteen- and nineteen-year-old man, in 1722 and 1723, Edwards wrote seventy purpose statements for his life, known as his “Resolutions.” Although he had been a Christian for only a year, Edwards knew that he must discipline himself for daily growth in holiness. As a result, with steely determination, this young Puritan minister wrote and worked hard to keep these seventy vows. Here is the key to his spiritual growth—Edwards disciplined himself for the purpose of godliness. He understood that growth in holiness is not a one-time act, but a lifelong pursuit, one that requires a daily determination to live according to the truths taught in Scripture. In accordance with his “Resolutions,” Edwards consecrated himself in all things in order to glorify God and gain the incorruptible crown.

This book is the second in a series titled *The Long Line of Godly Men Profiles*. In the first volume, *The Expository Genius of John Calvin*, we examined the preaching ministry of the great

Genevan Reformer of the sixteenth century, who so masterfully expounded the Scriptures. In this volume, we will consider the personal piety of Edwards, who lived in eighteenth-century America. This New England divine pursued an authentic spirituality that distinguished him as a man of God. Future volumes will focus on Martin Luther, George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon, and others, noting their far-reaching influence upon church history. Much spiritual profit is to be gained from studying the personal lives and public ministries of these spiritual leaders.

As we focus on Edwards, we will discover that he prized personal purity because he so treasured the splendor of God's holiness. "The beauty of Christianity is the beauty of holiness," David Vaughan writes. "And the enduring attraction of Edwards' life and teaching is not his metaphysical subtlety, not his keen intellect, but rather the beauty of his personal holiness."¹ Therefore, our emphasis in this volume will be Edwards' passionate pursuit of personal godliness through his "Resolutions." Space will not permit us to consider every resolution, but we shall study a great many of them in various categories. For further reflection, the complete text of the "Resolutions" can be found in an appendix at the end of this book.

The ultimate goal of this book is to challenge a new generation of believers to pursue holiness in their daily lives. My aim is to fix our sights on how we must be disciplined in this pursuit. To sharpen our focus, we will supplement our consideration of individual resolutions with passages from Edwards'

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diary and his “Personal Narrative” in order to gain insights into how he implemented them. By so doing, we will observe a model of a disciplined Christian life.

If you are a believer, may the unwavering resolve of Jonathan Edwards challenge you to live with a higher degree of commitment in your spiritual life. If you are not yet a believer, may his life reveal what a true Christian looks like and cause you to trust and follow Christ.

I want to thank the publishing team at Reformation Trust for their commitment to this series of profiles. Once again, I want to express my gratitude to Greg Bailey, director of publications, who has done an excellent job editing this manuscript and encouraging me. Also, Chris Larson, director of communications, was instrumental in the beautiful graphic design of this book. I remain proud of my association with Dr. R. C. Sproul and Ligonier Ministries.

At Christ Fellowship Baptist Church, which I have the honor to serve as senior pastor, I want to thank the elders and the congregation for supporting me in writing this book. These chapters were presented to the church as a series of messages on Wednesday evenings; I trust they were to the people’s edification. I want to express my gratitude to my executive assistant, Kay Allen, who typed this document and coordinated the effort. I also owe a special debt to my eldest son, Andrew, who helped in the initial researching and editing of this book, and to Mark Hassler, who provided additional research and editorial assistance.

THE UNWAVERING RESOLVE OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

My family remains a tower of encouragement to me in my personal life and ministry. My wife, Anne, and our four children, Andrew, James, Grace Anne, and John, stand as one with me in this book. What I write, they believe and live.

Soli Deo Gloria.

—Steven J. Lawson
Mobile, Alabama
July 2008

Note

1. David Vaughn, *A Divine Light: The Spiritual Leadership of Jonathan Edwards* (Nashville: Cumberland House, 2007), 156.

Edwards' Life and Legacy

I am tempted, perhaps foolish, to compare the Puritans to the Alps, Luther and Calvin to the Himalayas, and Jonathan Edwards to Mount Everest! He has always seemed to me the man most like the Apostle Paul.¹

—D. MARTYN LLOYD-JONES

It has been almost three centuries since Jonathan Edwards last ministered in Colonial New England, and yet, he is still widely regarded as the most distinguished minister ever to grace the American church. With enduring influence, Edwards continues to tower over the intellectual and spiritual life of the evangelical church. His theological writings were stunningly brilliant, his pastoral ministry was fruitful, and his Christian walk was exemplary.

Providentially placed into the eighteenth century, in the

years before the United States came into being, Edwards lived at a strategic crossroad of church history. Considered “the last of the medieval Scholastic theologians”² and “the last representative of Puritan theology and thought in the New World,”³ Edwards also was “the first of the modern American philosopher-theologians.”⁴ In like manner, George Marsden, author of an acclaimed biography of Edwards, calls him “the most acute early American philosopher.”⁵ Revered Princeton theologian Benjamin B. Warfield agrees, asserting that Edwards “stands out as the one figure of real greatness in the intellectual life of colonial America.”⁶ And B. K. Kuiper writes that he was “the outstanding intellectual figure in colonial America.”⁷

Many regard Edwards as the most eminent preacher ever to come from what is now the United States. He delivered what many believe to be America’s most famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Others esteem Edwards as one of America’s greatest theologians. He is recognized as “the theologian of the First Great Awakening,”⁸ for he stood squarely at “the headwaters of the revivals”⁹ in the 1730s and 1740s. It also has been said that Edwards was America’s “greatest [theologian] of any variety”¹⁰ and one of “the half-dozen greatest theologians of all time.”¹¹

Edwards also excelled as a writer. Marsden believes that three of Edwards’ many works—*Religious Affections*, *Freedom of the Will*, and *The Nature of True Virtue*—stand as “masterpieces in the larger history of Christian literature.”¹² Reformed theologian R. C. Sproul estimates that *Freedom of*

the Will “is the most important theological work ever published in America.”¹³ Paul Ramsey, an Edwardian scholar, writes that *Freedom of the Will* “is sufficient to establish its author as the greatest philosopher-theologian yet to grace the American scene.”¹⁴

Edwards' lasting influence can be measured in other ways, as well. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a study traced Edwards' descendants. The results were staggering. From Edwards came a large and distinguished progeny: three hundred clergymen, missionaries, and theological professors; 120 college professors; 110 lawyers; more than sixty physicians; more than sixty authors of good books; thirty judges; fourteen presidents of universities; numerous giants in American industry; eighty holders of major public office; three mayors of large cities; three governors of states; three U.S. senators; one chaplain of the U.S. Senate; one comptroller of the U.S. Treasury; and one vice president of the United States.¹⁵ It is hard to imagine that anyone else has contributed more vitally to the soul of this nation than this New England divine.

There is no doubt that Edwards was a giant of the Christian faith, one whose influence is still keenly felt today. As S. M. Houghton writes, Edwards became “a star of the first magnitude in the annals of the Church of God.”¹⁶ Meic Pearse believes that he was “the most influential single figure in American Christianity until the twentieth century—and arguably down to the present.”¹⁷ Harry S. Stout marvels over Edwards' “enduring ability to speak across the ages.”¹⁸

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