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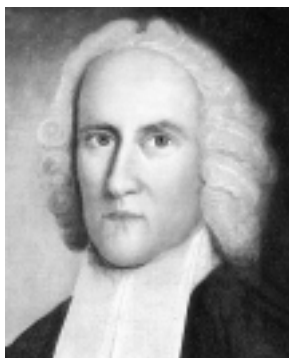
Jonathan Edwards

(1703-1758)

Elizabeth, 8th child of ancestor William Tuttil, was baptized in New Haven on 9 November 1645. On 19 November 1667, in the 22nd year of her age, she married Richard Edwards, a minister in East Windsor, Connecticut. In 1703, her 36th year, she gave birth to a son, Jonathan. He was a prodigy, entering Yale at 13, and while there reading widely in philosophy as well as Scripture. To understand what came next, we must go back a couple of thousand years.

The ancient Hebrews had an idea of the afterlife, called Sheol, which like that of the ancient Greeks, was the place where all the spirits of the dead went. It was only in the Persian period, when the idea of good and bad gods came in, that we hear of a Satan versus a God. By the time of the Jesus Movement, heaven and hell had become distinguished, and some Biblical texts were read as promises of salvation – not national salvation (which was the original idea) but personal salvation. Not going to hell became the order of the day. Hell was the punishment for sins, but doesn't everyone have at least some sins? Yes, everyone does, and therefore no one can get into heaven by their own virtue. There must be a Saviour, Jesus, whose suffering atones for the sins of all.

So went the theory. In the early 18th century, beginning around 1720, a panic of uncertainty, called the Great Awakening, broke out in New England. Life had become secular, belief had become perfunctory. The religious asked, Are we *really* saved? In the early 1730's, such feelings were intense in western Massachusetts, and there they found their Man of the Hour.



Jonathan Edwards had been ordained in 1727 as assistant to his grandfather Solomon Stoddard, at Stoddard's church in Northampton, Massachusetts. To that church in 1741 Edwards preached what would be his most famous sermon: "Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God." It was repeated on 8 July 1741 in Enfield, Connecticut, and it is this version that finally became standard, being printed and widely distributed. It is still studied, by the students of such things, as the great masterpiece of the period.

The main points of the sermon are these. Notable is the sense of urgency; first arousing, and only at the end addressing, the fears of his listeners:

- God may cast man into Hell at any moment.
- The wicked are *condemned*, at this moment, to be cast into Hell.
- At any moment, Satan may seize the wicked.
- There is no protection from God's wrath.
- Only those "in Christ" will be spared.

This is at bottom an appeal to believe in Christ. "Revival" meetings, to awaken the public sense of the need for that belief, were widely held. The First Great Awakening eventually died down, but broke out again at the end of the century. The world, or at any rate the New England world, had not yet made its terms of coexistence with modernism.

Edwards' extreme early position was later modified, but not enough. His own congregation increasingly opposed him, and the pastoral relation was dissolved in 1751. He was popular elsewhere, and had offers from Stockbridge and other churches. He was interested in the mission to the Housatonic Indians, but spent his time mostly in reflection and writing. In 1757 he was persuaded to accept the presidency of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton), where he supported the new technique of vaccination against smallpox. He was himself in poor health, and his own inoculation, on 2 March 1758, killed him.

His repute, among both clergy and scholars, as well as the literary public, underwent a sort of revival in later years. The first residential college at Yale, Jonathan Edwards College, was named for him in 1933. As for the storms that attended him in his own church, they have pretty much quieted.

So if you should be visiting me in Northampton, coming from ancestral New Haven (up I-91, off at Old Exit 18, turn left at the bottom of the ramp and into town), you will see ahead of you, as you pause for the light at Main Street, the present Edwards Church:



Save by its name, and not everyone who passes by will pick up on that, none will be the wiser about the great events and notable stirrings that lie behind it, going on for three centuries ago.