



A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards

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Jonathan Edwards is one of the most extraordinary figures in American history. Arguably the most brilliant theologian ever born on American soil, Edwards (1703–1758) was also a pastor, a renowned preacher, a missionary to the Native Americans, a biographer, a college president, a philosopher, a loving husband, and the father of eleven children.

George M. Marsden -- widely acclaimed for his magisterial large study of Edwards -- has now written a new, shorter biography of this many-sided, remarkable man. *A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards* is not an abridgment of Marsden's earlier award-winning study but is instead a completely new narrative based on his extensive research. The result is a concise, fresh retelling of the Edwards story, rich in scholarship yet compelling and readable for a much wider audience, including students.

Known best for his famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Jonathan Edwards is often viewed as a proponent of fire, brimstone, and the wrath of God. As Marsden shows, however, the focus of Edwards's preaching was not God's wrath but rather his overwhelming and all-encompassing love. Marsden also rescues Edwards from the high realms of intellectual history, revealing him more comprehensively through the lens of his everyday life and interactions. Further, Marsden shows how Edwards provides a window on the fascinating and often dangerous world of the American colonies in the decades before the American Revolution.

Marsden here gives us an Edwards who illuminates both American history and Christian theology, an Edwards that will appeal to readers with little or no training in either field. This short life will contribute significantly to the widespread and growing interest in Jonathan Edwards.

A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards Details

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From Reader Review A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards for online ebook

Scott says

A nice foray into the life and thought of Edwards.

Ryan Hawkins says

(I listened to this on audiobook.)

Marsden clearly has a gift at detailing the life of someone. I'll be honest: I have not read/listened to many biographies in my life. But this was probably the first one where I was impressed with how it was delivered and organized. It was clear, compelling, concise, and sufficient.

He did a great job not only covering the details of Edwards' life, but also explaining well the context of 18th century colonial America. I learned just as much about that setting as I did about Edwards.

Moreover, I have read most of Edwards' major works now, and I thought Marsden did a surprisingly good job summarizing them. He not only put them in context, but he explained them pretty well (except for one, see below...)

So why only 4 stars? I really hesitate to not rate it 5. But for two main reasons. First, a smaller reason, is that the first chapter where he contrasts Edwards and Franklin was interesting, but seemed a little dragged out about Franklin. Marsden said in the introduction that this is not an abridgment of his larger work on Edwards—that it was something fresh, especially with the insights about Franklin. Then when you get into the first chapter, it seemed that so much about Franklin probably wasn't in the original because it wasn't necessary.

But the main reason why it was only 4 stars is because of something Marsden did that I thought was inexcusable. Throughout the book, and especially when he was summarizing Edwards' The End for Which God Crated the World, Marsden replaced Edwards' central focus on 'God's glory' with the idea of 'God's love'. This was appalling, not on theological grounds per se, but because as a biographer, why would he take such license to change Edwards' main point of his theology and even life?

?To say it another way, Edwards argued that the universe exists as a display of the glory of God. Meaning, that it has a personal beginning and that everything in it—from nature to humanity and all in between—exists as an emanation of God's glory/beauty. Edwards talks about this all the time. It dominated his life, sermons, treatises. And Marsden gets it right and explains it so well place after place. Except, Marsden substitutes 'God's love' where Edwards would talk about 'God's glory'—and this can be seen most clearly in Marsden's summary of The End for Which God Created the World, where Edwards talks about God's glory over and over, and Marsden only says God's love. This to me is not only terrible biography, but it is taking Edwards brilliant idea of glory (which of course includes his love, but is a more theologically accurate and biblical term) and trying to soften it for modern readers with the idea of love. Very unfortunate. So if Marsden didn't take such license there, I would've given it 5 stars.

But I would definitely recommend it as a summary of Edwards life, with fantastic context about 18th century

America and the setting of his major works.

Ben Chapman says

I thoroughly enjoyed this short look at the life of Jonathan Edwards. I now, Lord willing, will be spending many years to come learning and knowing more of this great man of God. Highly recommend.

Ty Lukasiewicz says

I listen to this as an audiobook and really enjoyed it. A great biography of Edwards and also an enjoying way to learn more history.

Chungsoo J. Lee says

A shorter version of Marsden's "Jonathan Edwards: A Life" with added texts regarding Benjamin Franklin as the contemporary and the comparison. Both were sons of a pastor with strict puritan upbringing; but one became the famous (though reluctant at first) political revolutionary and the other, according to Marsden, the important and lesser known religious revolutionary. Jonathan Edwards became a religious revolutionary (in 1740's and 50's in Northampton, Massachusetts, where he pastored a congregation) as he caused, defended and maintained what is later known as the Great Awakenings--the religious revival meetings that spread from there to other states and even to England and Scotland. To be sure, George Whitefield, the visiting Anglican preacher, sparked the second and the wider Awakenings; but it was Jonathan Edwards who provided the intellectual defense and guidance for the Great Awakenings. The phenomena were revolutionary in religious terms because they emphasized personal conversion experience at the heart of one's faith; and the phenomena spread directly from the preacher to the people without the intermediary of the pastors and the religious establishment. Although God's love was at the heart of Edwards' preaching and theology, the judgment of God was the pivotal message that galvanized the crowds and brought them to emotional and sometimes hysterical conversion experiences--very much like Billy Graham's preaching in the 20 century. The Indian invasions and diseases were constant threat to the colonial New England, the fact Marsden summarily dismisses as the important background of the Great Awakening. (The disease claimed several of Edward's 11 children; and he himself fell ill and died shortly after being installed as President of Princeton College.) In such background where one's security is at peril all the time, the question regarding death and one's life thereafter played the pivotal role in people's sentiment. This point is never mentioned by Marsden as an explanation of the wide spread of the Great Awakenings. But Marsden does mention the role of printing as one of the important instrument which help the Awakenings to spread in America and in England and Scotland. At the heart of the printing materials that contributed to the spread is Jonathan Edwards' own account of the first Great Awakening, which was edited by the newspapers and publishers.

Marsden rightly traces the present day Evangelical Christianity in America to the Great Awakenings that Jonathan Edwards began and guided. Accordingly, the same problems which the Great Awakening created are still present in the present day Evangelicalism such as the problem of backsliding, knowing or accusing and separating (as Whitefield often did to dismay of Edwards) the true Christians from the false ones; the dubious role of the itinerant preacher to the existing pastors at the church; the emphasis of the spiritual solutions to social, political, and economic problems.

Noteworthy is the fact that some of Jonathan Edwards' older relatives were abducted by the Indians. When they were "redeemed" and returned back to the New England after few years, one refused to return, having been used to the Indian ways; and when she was eventually returned, she became a Catholic, much to the family's great consternation. Being a literal interpreter of the Bible and a Post-Millennialist, Jonathan Edwards speculated that the Millennium will begin in the year 2000 after which Christ will come to reign forever. He was revered in his North Hampton congregation until he revised and rejected his grandfather, Rev. Solomon Stoddard's rule of church membership/communicant -- misjudging the congregant's even deeper reverence for the deceased Stoddard, who played the role of the minister, judge, and military leader in the small colonial town. He was fired from his church (for standing firmly in his principle regarding the small issue such as the communicant's membership) and took a small post at the Indian mission school in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where he was able to write and develop his mature theology. When he was invited to be the President of Princeton College, he was reluctant to leave the secluded setting of the Stockbridge where he could devote his time to writing. He took the position nonetheless while prophetically citing his disease prone health and while lamenting the fact that he could not work on the ambitious project of a grand history of redemption from the Creation to Christ's Second Coming. His treatise on freedom (a soft determinism along the line of Aristotle, noting the role of disposition, habits, and character) and cosmology based on God's love are noteworthy intellectual works. He authored a biography of a young missionary to the Indians, "The Life and Diary of David Brainerd," who could have married one of Edward's daughters, had he survived the illness, and who was known for spiritual purity and sacrifice and his love for the daughter who cared for him at the sickbed. The biography became a well known seller along with and in contrast to Ben Franklin's autobiography as presentation of the two very different American ideal of life.

Two notes on Edwards theology. Edwards often speaks of the "beauty" of God's love and God's creation. By beauty, I think he means the dis-interested aesthetic delight as in Kant. We are to be attracted to and by this beauty, which is present in nature. (Edwards often took delight in contemplation of nature seen as God's work and expression of God's love.) But the divine beauty is most brilliantly exhibited in God's own sacrifice of his Son on the cross. Attracted by this beauty (of love), we are to live in and practice God's love.

Second note is about Edwards' cosmology, which provides an alternative and direct contrast to the contemporary deism maintained by the founding fathers such as Ben Franklin: That at the heart of the creation is the personal God who by his love created the world. The whole creation is expression of God's love, which is exhibited most brilliantly at the Cross. One might even say, along the line of Plotinus, that the universe is emanation of God's love.

Last note: Jonathan Edwards' famous or infamous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," could not be delivered in its entirety because in the midway to his sermon, before he could get to the section on God's mercy, people were already wailing and crying: "How can I be saved?" etc. He had the congregation in his hands before he finished his sermon. Influenced by George Whitefield's fiery preaching, Edwards employed more than usual metaphors and vivid images in this particular sermon, to its poignant effect. (His sermons were carefully written but mostly delivered by memory.)

Witherspoon was the only signer of the Declaration of Independence who followed Jonathan Edwards' theology and religious conviction. Marsden wonders what would have happened had Edwards lived through the days of American Independence. Nonetheless, the legacy of the Great Awakening Jonathan Edwards began is still alive and strong, making American both secular and extremely religious at the same time, according to Marsden. His theology and legacy is also revered among Korean Evangelicals today.

Edwards was not successful as the head of the Indian boarding school/Indian mission in Stockbridge, MA. The mission was plagued with the internal squabbles between Edwards and his nephew (?) who purchased

and usurped the Indian lands, as many did. In addition, the trusted Indian leader he relied on was killed by other Indian attack. Even though Edwards believed in equality between the White and the Indians, he nonetheless believed that in order for the Indians to be converted, they must also be Europeanized. Hence the boarding school where Indian children were boarded and educated. Toward the end of his tenure there in Stockbridge, there were less than 5 Indian children in the boarding school. While in Northampton, MA, when Indians were converted (as few did), they were treated as spiritual equals but not as social equals. His church, as well as other Puritan churches at the time, sat the congregation according to social rank. Edwards was annoyed when people quibbled about the seating at the church but he did not ban the social classification at all. He belonged to the older generation who still believed in the social hierarchy and respected authorities. He did not oppose slavery and did have one female slave who was well treated. The next generation of the Edwards would later actively oppose slavery.

Nate Weis says

Listened on Christian Audio. Excellent introduction to Edwards.

James says

I've listened to the whole unabridged audio book of this twice now. It's a very good "read" in the sense that it goes fairly quickly, only hitting the highlights of Edwards' overall life. Marsden does an interesting thing throughout in that he keeps making comparisons between the life of Ben Franklin and Edwards, both of whom were about the same age and whose lives took drastically different trajectories. Since both Franklin and Edwards shaped America with their respective lives and work, Marsden uses this contrasting method to give us a sort of biographical explanation of the somewhat paradoxical nature of American history: it's commitment to secularism and religiosity.

As the title suggests, Marsden's biography is quite short; but it's still interesting and informative focusing upon particular details in Edwards' life, ministry, and theology. I think there's enough detail within to spark someone's interest in tracking down other details of Edwards. Marsden ends the book with a list of suggested readings along with a guide for which books are good for which purposes.

Excellent biography! Highly recommend for all Edwards enthusiasts as well as those interested in early American history.

Jon says

less about personal spiritual journey as contextually his work/life in greater movements of American Christiandom.

Michael says

To echo the praise of Tim Keller, this book is a masterpiece. The author has mastered his subject: you'll learn

not only about Jonathan's life, but also the cultural and historical background necessary to appreciate and critique the man. It's not a hagiography, but does what all the best biographies do -- you see the whole man, warts and all. I appreciated that this towering Reformed figure (perhaps America's greatest theologian) also had flaws -- for example, his ill-timed revolution in changing Solomon Stoddard's standards for communicant membership and infant baptism. The juxtaposition of Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin Franklin is especially illuminating.

I was first introduced to Jonathan Edwards through the ministry of John Piper and his book *_Desiring God_*. My wife and I then read *_Marriage to a Difficult Man_*, a biography of Sarah and Johnathan Edwards. I followed this with *_Awakenings_*, an updated collection of some of Jonathan Edwards' key writings. I wholeheartedly recommend this book as the best short biography I know of about Edwards.

Logan says

I've read Marsden's excellent full-length work and was thinking that this was just going to be a condensed version. I was pleasantly surprised that it is, and it isn't. Marsden basically asks the question "why is Jonathan Edwards important to America and to Christians" and proceeds to answer why. He has an excellent grasp of both history and theology, Puritanism and Calvinism. One of the most interesting things in this book is his comparison and contrast of Benjamin Franklin and Edwards, two influential contemporaries with very different theological and political outlooks.

I really enjoyed it and would highly recommend it as a primer to Edwards.

Starry says

Enjoyed this. Written by an expert who has also written the definitive (aka long!) work on Edwards. This book highlights interesting comparisons to Benjamin Franklin and George Whitefield--these three men were among the most famous in Pre-Revolutionary America--and also explains how the spiritual revolution of the Great Awakening drastically impacted our nation's founding and lead to the political revolution (salvation not through church establishment but to each individual; revivals were outside church, both physically and organizationally).

Interesting fact learned: the sermon we most associate with Edwards--*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*--was not his typical fare and, in fact, was never fully preached due to the audience's terror at its message. Sadly, this means Edwards didn't reach the part about God's grace freely offered to undeserving sinners.

This book would also make a great pre-read before Edwards' sermons to help place them in the circumstances of their writing. I especially appreciated the last chapter on the spiritual legacy of Edwards' tragically short life.

John says

I am giving this five stars in part because I'm so excited it exists. I knew that Marsden wrote quite a long life of Jonathan Edwards, and it is apparently really good, and I wanted to read it. But also I didn't want to read it because it is so long, and it is very hard to justify spending time with hundreds of pages that are not related to my dissertation. But then I had to write a lecture on the Great Awakening, and I find that Marsden also wrote a **SHORT** life of Edwards! 142 pages! Hooray!

This was really helpful for my Great Awakening lecture. Marsden makes a good argument for the importance of the 1st Great Awakening as this other, equally important revolution - one revolutionized politics, one revolutionized religion. I'm not sure I buy it entirely, but it works well in trying to explain the importance of the event. Also, he parallels the lives of Edwards and Ben Franklin pretty well, which is also helpful in painting a clear picture of the American context that Edwards grew up in. The GA is very hard to explain to people, especially in one quick lecture...I feel like I should buy a copy of this book.

Ian Hammond says

Jonathan Edwards was a sinner with significant failings saved by the grace of God. And I deeply admire this man for his uncommon combination of piety, scholarship, and passion for missions.

Jay Perkins says

A few years ago I worked through Marsden's definitive biography of Edwards and enjoyed every bit of it. This "Short Life" is a perfect summary of Edward's life and should not be overlooked if one has read the larger bio. Brief, concise, and incredibly easy to read, Marsden adds some additional touches that keep the reader further engaged. I especially liked when Marsden paralleled and contrasted Edwards with his contemporary Benjamin Franklin and the Revolutionary generation. His summary at the end is especially good. This is a book that should be (and can be) read by evangelicals for the relevance it has today.

Listened to the audiobook offered by Christianaudio.com.

Vinícius Pimentel says

Leitura cativante. O autor consegue condensar num texto agradável os muitos aspectos importantes da vida e ministério de Jonathan Edwards, além de sua influência sobre a história americana em geral. A frequente menção a Benjamin Franklin constitui um recurso interessante para contrastar o pensamento e as preocupações que marcaram a vida de Edwards com o secularismo, iluminismo e materialismo que cresciam na nascente sociedade norte-americana.
