

Jonathan Edwards on Prayer

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Michael Haykin observes that “In the past forty years the books, essays, and doctoral theses on Jonathan Edwards’ theology have become a veritable flood. Yet there still remains much to be done regarding various details of his piety. For example, there still needs to be written a major study on Edwards’ theology of prayer.”¹ The purpose of this paper then is to contribute to that need.² In the following pages, I will sketch Edwards’ prayer life, his description of prayer and his devotion to it, his doctrine of prayer, and his distinct emphasis on the Holy Spirit in prayer. In conclusion, I will derive some lessons from his prayer life.

I. *Dawn of His Prayer Life*

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), great theologian, pastor, teacher, author, and often regarded as the last Puritan,³ was arguably one of the few truly great men of prayer. Peter Beck calls him “the theologian of prayer,”⁴ a designation proved convincingly in his stupendous dissertation.

¹ Michael A.G. Haykin, *A Sweet Flame: Piety in the Letters of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007), 167.

² There have been some works done on this area. For instance, Robert Oscar Bakke, “The Concert of Prayer: Back to the Future?” (D.Min. diss., Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 1993). However, this dissertation does not particularly intend to draw up Edwards’ theology of prayer; rather, while it touches on Edwards’ prayer, the focus is only on his treatise known as *An Humble Attempt*. Likewise, Glenn R. Kreider’s article, “Jonathan Edwards’s Theology of Prayer,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160 (2003) also attempts to scrutinize Edwards’ theology of prayer but only in light of Edwards’ sermon, *The Most High, A Prayer-Hearing God*, though it also interacts with other writings of Edwards. The most recent work is that of Peter Beck, “The Voice of Faith: Jonathan Edwards’s Theology of Prayer” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007). This, to my knowledge, is what meets the need that Haykin has mentioned.

³ See David C. Brand, *Profile of the Last Puritan: Jonathan Edwards, Self-Love, and the Dawn of the Beatific* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1991).

⁴ Beck, Abstract to “The Voice of Faith: Jonathan Edwards’s Theology of Prayer.”

Born in a Christian home, as the only boy among eleven children, Edwards lived in a prayerful atmosphere. His father who was a minister and godly mother reared him with piety and prayer, as Sereno Dwight, Edwards' grandson, points out:

Many were the prayers presented by parental affection that this only and beloved son might be filled with the Holy Spirit; from a child know the Holy Scriptures; and be great in the sight of the Lord. They who thus fervently and constantly commended him to God, manifested equal diligence in training him up for God. Prayer excited to exertion, and exertion again was encouraged by prayer. The domestic circle was a scene of supplication, and it was a scene of instruction.

The faithful religious instructions of his parents "rendered him when a child familiarly conversant with God and Christ, with his own character and duty, with the way of salvation, and with the nature of that eternal life which, begun on earth, is perfected in heaven." *Their prayers were not forgotten, and their efforts did not remain without effect.*⁵

No wonder then why as young as seven or eight years old, Edwards already learned to pray with what may be considered 'extraordinary zeal.' Recalling his childhood life, Edwards records in his *Personal Narrative*, written when he was probably thirty-five years old:⁶

I had a variety of concerns and exercises about my soul from my childhood; but I had two more remarkable seasons of awakening, before I met with that change by which I was brought to those new dispositions, and that new sense of things, that I have since had, the first time was when I was a boy, some years before I went to college, at a time of remarkable awakening in my father's congregation. I was then very much affected for many months, and concerned about the things of religion, and my soul's salvation; and was abundant in religious duties. *I used to pray five times a day in secret and to spend much time in religious conversation with other boys; and used to meet with them to pray together.*⁷

Edwards adds:

I experienced I know not what kind of delight in religion. My mind was much engaged in it, and had much self-righteous pleasure, and it was my delight to abound in religious duties. *I, with some of my schoolmates, joined together and*

⁵ Sereno E. Dwight, "Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, ed. Edward Hickman (1834; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), xii (italics mine).

⁶ See Donald S. Whitney, "Pursuing A Passion For God Through Spiritual Disciples: Learning From Jonathan Edwards," in *A God Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 117.

⁷ Dwight, "Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards," xii (italics mine).

*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.*⁸

Here the very young Edwards already showed maturity in his prayer life. But as Haykin recognizes: “this childhood spirituality – albeit a prognostication of his future interests – soon disappeared.”⁹ The time came that the young Edwards completely lost his zeal in prayer:

But, in progress of time, my convictions and affections wore off, and I entirely lost all those affections and delights, and left off secret prayer, at least as to any constant preference of it; and turned like a dog to his vomit, and went on in the ways of sin. Indeed, I was at times very uneasy, especially towards the latter part of my time at college, when it pleased God to seize me with a pleurisy; in which he brought me nigh to the grave and shook me over the pit of hell. And yet it was not long after my recovery, before I fell again into my old ways of sin.¹⁰

At this time, Edwards was actually wrestling with his salvation:

My concern now wrought more by inward struggles and conflicts, and self-reflection. I made seeking my salvation the main business of my life. But yet, it seems to me, I sought it after a miserable seeking ever succeeded. I was indeed brought to seek salvation, in a manner that I never was before; I felt a spirit to part with all things in the world, for an interest in Christ. My concern continued, and prevailed, with many exercising thoughts and inward struggles; but yet it never seemed to be proper, to express that concern by the name of terror.¹¹

One of his struggles was about the doctrine of God’s sovereignty in salvation. He could not accept this doctrine, because to him it appeared “like a horrible doctrine.”¹² But when he, through the “extraordinary influence of God’s Spirit,” became “convinced, and fully satisfied” with this doctrine, his mind began to rest in it.¹³ What he previously called “a horrible doctrine”

⁸ Ibid., (italics mine).

⁹ Michael A. G. Haykin, *Jonathan Edwards: The Holy Spirit in Revival* (New York: Evangelical Press, 2005), 8.

¹⁰ Dwight, “Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards,” xii.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

now became “pleasant, bright, and sweet” for him.¹⁴ This experience coupled with his encounter with the words in 1 Timothy 1:17: “Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen,”¹⁵ brought him a “sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things.”¹⁶ As Edwards writes:

As I read the words [in 1 Tim. 1:17], 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. Never any words of Scripture seemed to me as these words did. 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!¹⁷

He continues:

I kept saying, and as it were singing, over these words of Scripture to myself; *and went to pray to God that I might enjoy him; and prayed in a manner quite different from what I used to do, with a new sort of affection.* But it never came into my thought, that there was any thing spiritual, or of a saving nature, in this.¹⁸

This experience marks the conversion of Edwards in 1721, probably during the spring,¹⁹ when he was seventeen years old.²⁰ Here he attests:

From about that time I began to have a new kind of apprehensions and ideas of Christ, and the work of redemption, and the glorious was of salvation by him. An inward, sweet sense of these things, at times, came into my heart; and my soul

¹⁴ Ibid., xiii.

¹⁵ All scriptural quotations in this paper are directly taken from Edwards’ pen, unless noted otherwise. In this regard, two things should be remembered: (1) Edwards consistently used the 1611 King James Version of the Bible in his sermons, and (2) as John F. Wilson observes: “Edwards appears to have quoted Scripture from memory, and he is not always accurate,” cited in Kreider, “Jonathan Edwards’s Theology of Prayer,” 437.

¹⁶ Dwight, “Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards,” xiii.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., (italics mine).

¹⁹ Haykin, *Jonathan Edwards: The Holy Spirit in Revival*, 8. Whitney also holds the same date (spring of 1721), “Pursuing A Passion For God Through Spiritual Disciples: Learning From Jonathan Edwards,” 112. For more details about the date of Edwards’ conversion, see Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburg: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1996), 35-37. See also George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edward: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 39-43. I owe these references to Haykin in his endnotes, *Jonathan Edwards: The Holy Spirit in Revival*, 186. One may also want to see the first chapter of Harold Simonson’s book, *Jonathan Edwards: Theologian of the Heart*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 17-32. That chapter is titled “Edwards’ Record of Conversion.”

²⁰ Edwards was born October 5, 1703. Thus, assuming his conversion took place during the spring of 1721, he was then yet seventeen years old.

was led away in pleasant views and contemplation of them. And my mind was greatly engaged to spend time in reading and meditating on Christ, on the beauty and excellency of his person, and the lovely way of salvation by free grace in him.²¹

What is noteworthy here is his testimony that after his conversion he prayed in a way quite different from what he used to do, with a new kind of affection. This indicates that he only truly enjoyed communing with God, when he came to know the Lord Jesus Christ. His childhood prayer life was not yet an activity of his born again soul. It was only a manifestation of God's common grace in his life. Edwards describes it this way:

Those former delights never reached the heart; and did not arise from any sight of the divine excellency of the things of God; or any taste of the soul-satisfying and life giving good there is in them.²²

Hence, it can be learned that first, even an unbeliever can have zeal in prayer, but without genuine conversion, this zeal will eventually expire; and second, it is only when one experiences authentic conversion that he can really come with delight and passion to God's presence.

II. Description of Prayer and His Devotion in It

A. Customary work of the soul

Edwards understands prayer as a natural work of the born again soul. Writing of the transformation in his life, Edwards says:

My mind was greatly fixed on divine things; almost perpetually in the contemplation of them. I spent most of my time in thinking of divine things, year after year; often walking alone in the woods, and solitary places, for meditation, soliloquy, and prayer, and converse with God; and it was always my manner, at

²¹ Ibid.

²² Dwight, "Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards," xiii.

such times, to sing forth my contemplations. I was almost constantly in ejaculatory prayer, wherever I was.²³

Then comes his famous line in prayer:

Prayer seemed to be natural to me, as a breath by which the inward burnings of my heart had vent.²⁴

This echoes Thomas Watson's words: "Prayer is the soul's breathing itself into the bosom of its heavenly Father."²⁵ George Marsden, who has written a massive biography of Edwards, succinctly summarizes Edwards' prayer life which shows how natural or customary prayer was to him:

Edwards usually rose at four or five in the morning in order to spend thirteen hours in his study.... He began the day with private prayers followed by family prayers, by candlelight in winter. Each meal was accompanied by household devotions, and at the end of each day Sarah joined him in his study for prayers. Jonathan kept secret the rest of his daily devotional routine, following Jesus' command to pray in secret. Throughout the day, his goal was to remain constantly with a sense of living in the presence of God, as difficult as that might be. Often he added secret days of fasting and additional prayers.²⁶

Donald Whitney adds: "Prayer, then, for Edwards was both planned and informal, scheduled and spontaneous, on a daily basis."²⁷ To adopt the words of Puritan William Gurnal:

[Prayer was] the same to the new creature as crying is to the natural. The child is not learned by art or example to cry, but instructed by nature; it comes into the world crying. Praying is not a lesson got by forms and rules of art, but flowing from principles of new life.²⁸

Indeed, on the day Edwards was converted, prayers began to flow naturally from his new life.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Cited in Isaac David Ellis Thomas, comp. ed., *The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1977), 209.

²⁶ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edward: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 133.

²⁷ Whitney, "Pursuing A Passion For God Through Spiritual Disciples: Learning From Jonathan Edwards," 115.

²⁸ Cited in Thomas, comp. ed., *The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations*, 209-10.

B. Closet prayer

Closet or secret prayer for Edwards was also of prime importance. His first biographer Samuel Hopkins is able to testify of this:

Mr. Edwards made a secret of his private devotion, and therefore it cannot be particularly known: though there is much evidence, that he was punctual, constant and frequent in secret, and often kept days of fasting and prayer in secret; and set apart time for serious, devout meditation on spiritual and eternal things, as part of his religious exercise in secret.²⁹

Normally Edwards spent his private supplications to pray for the advancement of Christ's kingdom in the world, a theme crucial to his theology:

I had great longings for the advancement of Christ's kingdom in the world; my secret prayers used to be, in great part, taken up in praying for it.³⁰

Sadly, Edwards' emphasis on personal devotion often led others to accuse him of being antisocial.³¹ However, Whitney explains: "Some of his habits for seclusion are understandable when we realize that his study, writing, and sermon preparation had to be done in the same house with a wife, eleven children, servants, and frequent guests."³²

Sometimes Edwards would also go out with his friend John Smith to a solitary place to talk about the things of God:

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. *Sometimes Mr. Smith and I walked there together, to converse on the things of God; and our conversation used to turn much on the advancement of Christ's kingdom in the world, and the glorious things that God would accomplish for his church in the latter days.*³³

²⁹ Cited in Whitney, "Pursuing A Passion For God Through Spiritual Disciples: Learning From Jonathan Edwards," 119.

³⁰ Dwight, "Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards," xiv.

³¹ Whitney, "Pursuing A Passion For God Through Spiritual Disciples: Learning From Jonathan Edwards," 117.

³² Ibid.

³³ Dwight, "Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards," xiv (italics mine).

This shows that Edwards was not antisocial, though he tended to stress private devotion, or what he called ‘close meditation’ or ‘secret converse with God.’ For instance in his treatise, *On Religious Affections*, he tells his readers:

Some are greatly affected when in company; but have nothing that bears any manner of proportion to it in secret, in close meditation, prayer and conversing with God when alone, and separated from all the world. A true Christian doubtless delights in religious fellowship and Christian conversation, and finds much to affect his heart in it; but he also delights at times to retire from all mankind, to converse with God in solitude. And this also has its peculiar advantages for fixing his heart, and engaging his affections. True religion disposes persons to be much alone in solitary places, for holy meditation and prayer.³⁴

But again his special emphasis on the practice of personal communion does not mean that he disregards the importance of public devotion:

there is much in christian conversation, social and public worship, tending greatly to refresh and rejoice the hearts of the saints. But this is all that I aim at by what has been said, to show that it is the nature of true grace, however *it loves christian society in its place*, in a peculiar manner to delight in retirement, and secret converse with God.³⁵

Here Edwards actually seeks to balance secret and social spirituality, though as previously mentioned, undeniably he gave more weight to privacy. Nevertheless, true religion, for him, delights in both, as he concludes:

So that if persons appears greatly engaged in social religion, and but little in the religion of the closet, and are often highly affected when with others, and but little moves when they have none but God and Christ to converse with, it looks very darkly upon their religion.³⁶

³⁴ Jonathan Edwards, “On Religious Affections,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, ed. Edward Hickman (1834; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 311-12. I owe this reference to Whitney, “Pursuing A Passion For God Through Spiritual Disciples: Learning From Jonathan Edwards,” 117-18.

³⁵ Edwards, “On Religious Affections,” 312 (italics his).

³⁶ Ibid.

C. Concerted prayer

In his treatise titled heavily, *An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer, for the Revival of Religion and Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on Earth* (hereafter *An Humble Attempt*), Edwards, on the other hand, highlights what he termed 'concert for prayer,' which is the opposite concept of the closet prayer. The title itself elucidates Edwards' thrust in this work. He is entreating God's people to unite together in not just prayer but 'extraordinary prayer' that will produce revival and consequently advance Christ's kingdom on earth.

David Bryant, in his introductory notes, explains at least two reasons for which Edwards wrote this treatise. "In truth," says Bryant, "*An Humble Attempt* was composed because, after two remarkable movements of God in revival [(1) on a more local community level from 1734-35, and then (2) in the First Great Awakening in the colonies, especially during the early 1740's'], Edwards sensed the spiritual momentum was waning."³⁷ Since Edwards was so convinced that God would not send revival again until His people earnestly prayed together, he then called for a concert of prayer. Glen Kreider puts it this way: "Although he [Edwards] was convinced that the revival or renewal of true religion was a surprising, supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, Edwards believed that God might send a new manifestation of His Spirit in response to the prayers of His people."³⁸ And "this conviction," as Kreider further notes, "is clearly stated in 'Some Thoughts concerning the Revival,' written in 1742 during the revivals later known as the Great Awakening."³⁹

³⁷ David Bryant, Introduction to *A Call to United, Extraordinary Prayer...*, by Jonathan Edwards (Ross-shire, U.K.: Christian Heritage, 2003), 15-16. See also John H. Armstrong, Introduction to *Praying Together for True Revival* by Jonathan Edwards, ed. T. M. Moore (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2004), 1-10. For a more detailed introductory remarks to *An Humble Attempt*, see Bakke, "The Concert of Prayer: Back to the Future?" 69 ff.

³⁸ Kreider, "Jonathan Edwards's Theology of Prayer," 435.

³⁹ Ibid.

It is Gods' will, through his wonderful grace, that the prayers of his saints should be one great and principal means of carrying on the designs of Christ's kingdom on earth. When God has something very great to accomplish for his church, 'tis his will that there should precede it the extraordinary prayers of his people.⁴⁰

The second reason Bryant gives is that Edwards wanted to provide additional theological help for a document dubbed *Memorial*, which was written by Scottish pastors.⁴¹ To explicate this so-called *Memorial*, Bryant tells a helpful story:

Rising out of scores of prayer societies already functioning in Scotland around 1740, especially among young people, by 1744 a committee of ministers determined it was time to do more. They decided to try a two-year 'experiment', uniting all prayer groups and praying Christians in their nation into a common prayer strategy. They called for focused revival prayer on every Saturday evening and Sunday morning, as well as on the first Tuesday of each quarter. By 1746 they were so gratified by the impact of their experiment that they composed a call to prayer to the church worldwide, especially in the colonies (*Memorial*).⁴²

1. *Beauty of this concerted prayer*

Within *An Humble Attempt*, Edwards writes that this orchestrated prayer is the most beautiful and amiable thing that one can imagine on earth: "How *condecent*, how *beautiful*, and of *good tenderly* would it be, for multitudes of Christians, in a various parts of the world, by *explicit agreement*, to unite in such prayer as is proposed to us. *Union* is one of the most *amiable* things that pertains to human society; yea, it is one of the most beautiful and happy things on earth, which indeed makes earth most like heaven."⁴³

⁴⁰ Cited in *Ibid.*, 436.

⁴¹ Bryant, Introduction to *A Call to United, Extraordinary Prayer*, 17.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 16-17.

⁴³ Jonathan Edwards, "An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer, for the Revival of Religion and Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on Earth," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, ed. Edward Hickman (1834; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 295 (italics his).

2. Benefit of this concerted prayer

But this corporate prayer is not only beautiful; it is also beneficial, as Edwards puts forth: “Such an union in prayer for the general outpouring of the Spirit of God, would not only be beautiful, but *profitable* too.”⁴⁴ Then he names some benefits of this synchronized prayer:

It would tend very much to promote union and charity between distant members of the church of Christ, to promote public spirit, love to the church of God, and concern for the interest of *Zion*; as well as be an amiable exercise and manifestation of such a spirit. Union in religious duties, especially in the duty of prayer, in praying one with and for another, and jointly for their common welfare, above almost all other things, tends to promote mutual affection and endearment.⁴⁵

For ministers, adds Edwards, this concert of prayer,

would naturally tend to engage...[them]—the business of whose lives it should be, to seek the welfare of the church of Christ, and advancement of his kingdom—to greater diligence and earnestness in their work; and it would have a tendency to the spiritual profit and advantage of each particular person. For persons to be thus engaged in extraordinary prayer for the revival and flourishing state of religion in the world, will naturally lead each one to reflect on *himself*, and consider how religion flourishes in his own heart, and how far his example contributes to that for which he is praying.⁴⁶

Hence we see that Edwards, as a man of prayer, was both a private and public person. He savored both secret and social prayer in his life.

D. Connection between prayer and study

Another fascinating thought on prayer that Edwards had is the intermingling of prayer and study. We know how much time he spent for his study—13 hours, and as he was studying he was doing so prayerfully, so that prayer and study intertwined with each other. Iain Murray, in his biography of Edwards, illustrates this point well:

⁴⁴ Ibid., (italics his).

⁴⁵ Ibid., (italics his).

⁴⁶ Ibid., (italics his).

Edwards maintained daily set times for prayer, when it was probably his custom to speak aloud. He also had, as already noted, particular days which he set aside for solitude, meditation and fasting. But prayer was not a compartment in his daily routine, an exercise which possessed little connection with the remainder of his hours alone. Rather *he sought to make his study itself a sanctuary, and whether wrestling with Scripture, preparing sermons or writing in his notebooks, he worked as a worshipper. Thought, prayer and writing were all woven together.*⁴⁷

Whitney's observation is similar:

Edwards was so devoted to prayer that it is hard to find a daily routine for him that wasn't permeated with it... He prayed over his studies, and he prayed as he walked in the evening. Prayer was both a discipline and a part of his leisure.⁴⁸

Even Edwards' physical exercise was permeated with prayer. Many comment that one of Edwards' weaknesses was that he was a workaholic at the cost of his health. However, while it is true that Edwards failed to balance his physical and spiritual life, he was not altogether neglectful of his health. In fact, in the twentieth of his *Resolutions*, written when he was nineteen years old, his concern pertains to his whole-being: "Resolved, to maintain the strictest temperance in eating and drinking."⁴⁹ Moreover, he himself makes a record in his *Personal Narrative* that he would ride out into woods for his health. To quote him: "I rode out into the woods for my health...having alighted from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer."⁵⁰ But again what is noteworthy here is that even his physical exercise was interfused with a spirit of prayer.

⁴⁷ Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*, 143 (italics mine).

⁴⁸ Whitney, "Pursuing A Passion For God Through Spiritual Disciples: Learning From Jonathan Edwards," 114.

⁴⁹ Jonathan Edwards, "Resolutions," in *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn, vol. 16 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Harry S. Stout (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 754.

⁵⁰ Cited in Whitney, "Pursuing A Passion For God Through Spiritual Disciples: Learning From Jonathan Edwards," 117.

So far we have looked at some of Edwards' basic descriptions of prayer—customary, closet, and concerted—and how he himself lived out such concepts of prayer. One must remember that Edwards did not just formulate these concepts from theories; rather, they were based on certain doctrines that Edwards himself deduced from the Scripture, as Stephen Nichols asserts: “Edwards anchors his thoughts on prayer in good theology.”⁵¹ His practice of prayer is rooted in divine dogma. In the following pages, we will consider Edwards' doctrine of prayer.

III. Doctrine of Prayer

Edwards did not draw up a systematic theology, thus much of what we know about his theology comes from his scattered writings. In the case of his doctrinal position on prayer, we have his sermons as our primary source. Prayer was one of Edwards' favorite subjects in his homilies. And it is in these preachments that his doctrine of prayer was unfolded. What I hope to do now is take a look at one of Edwards' sermons, *The Most High, A Prayer-Hearing God* (1736),⁵² in which, for Kreider, “Edwards's most concise public presentation of his theology of prayer is found.”⁵³

The Most High, A Prayer-Hearing God is one of Edwards' early and important sermons on prayer which he delivered on a fast day appointed because of a certain epidemic that brought sickness and eventually death to his congregation. Relatives of the dead prayed, but they felt God did not listen to them. Consequently, they started to doubt if God hears prayer.⁵⁴ In this context

⁵¹ Stephen Nichols, *Jonathan Edwards: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thoughts* (Philipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2001), 206.

⁵² Jonathan Edwards, “The Most High, A Prayer-Hearing God,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, ed. Edward Hickman (1834; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 113-18.

⁵³ Kreider, “Jonathan Edwards's Theology of Prayer,” 437.

⁵⁴ Nichols, *Jonathan Edwards: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thoughts*, 205-6.

Edwards preached this message. As his sermon's title bears, he was convinced, contrary to their feeling, that God is a prayer-hearing God. Edwards arrived to such a conviction on the basis of his observation of the words in Psalm 65:2: "O thou that hearest prayer." Having briefly expounded this verse, Edwards concluded: "Hence we gather this doctrine, That it is the character of the Most High, that he is a God who hears prayer."⁵⁵ (It can be noticed from Edwards' sermons that he typically begins with a short exposition of a text or a verse or a portion of a verse,⁵⁶ and then draws a doctrine from his exposition, and at the end gives an application or use of this doctrine.)

The substance of this sermon is well summarized by a first paragraph of the sermon's body:

The Most High is a God that hears prayer. Though he is infinitely above all, and stands in no need of creatures; yet he is graciously pleased to take a merciful notice of poor worms of the dust. He manifests and presents himself as the object of prayer, appears as sitting on a mercy-seat, that men may come to him by prayer. When they stand in need of anything, he allows them to come, and ask it of him; and he is wont to hear their prayers. God in his word hath given many promises that he will hear their prayers; the Scripture is full of such examples; and in his dispensations towards his church, manifests himself to be a God that hears prayer.⁵⁷

A. Doctrine defined

As stated before, from Psalm 65:2 Edwards develops the doctrine that God is a prayer-hearing God. By this he means two things. First, God accepts "the supplication of those who pray to him."⁵⁸ "Their address to him is well taken, he is well pleased with it. He approves of

⁵⁵ Edwards, "The Most High, A Prayer-Hearing God," 113.

⁵⁶ As in the case of *The Most High, A Prayer-Hearing God*, where Edwards only spells out the first half of the verse.

⁵⁷ Edwards, "The Most High, A Prayer-Hearing God," 114.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

their asking such mercies as they request of him, and approves of their manner of doing it. He accepts of their prayers as an offering to him: he accepts the honour they do him in prayer.”⁵⁹

Second, “He *acts* agreeably to his acceptance. He sometimes manifests his acceptance of their prayers, by special discoveries of his mercy and sufficiency, which he makes to them *in prayer*, or immediately after. While they are praying, he gives them sweet views of his glorious grace, purity, sufficiency, and sovereignty; and enables them, with great quietness, to rest in him, to leave themselves and their prayers with him, submitting to his will, and trusting in his grace and faithfulness.”⁶⁰

Then, to avoid misunderstanding of this doctrine, Edwards clarifies: “Not that I conclude persons can hence argue, that the particular thing which they ask will certainly be given them, or that they can particularly foretell from it what God will do in answer to their prayers, any further than he has promised in his word; yet God may, and doubtless does, thus testify his acceptance of their prayers, and from hence they may confidently rest in his providence, in his merciful ordering and disposing, with respect to the thing which they ask.”⁶¹

B. Doctrine displayed

Having defined this doctrine, Edwards proceeds to display it. He gives at least five areas in which this doctrine is evident.

First, “in his giving such *free access* to him in prayer.”⁶² “God in his word,” states Edwards “manifests himself ready at all times to allow us this privilege. He sits on a throne of grace; and there is no veil to hide this throne, and keep us from it. The veil is rent from the top to

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid, (*italics his*).

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., (*italics his*).

the bottom; the way is open at all times, and we may go to God as often as we please.”⁶³ Then Edwards exclaims: “How wonderful is it that such worms as we should be allowed to come boldly at all times to so great a God!”⁶⁴

Second, “in his hearing prayer *so readily*.”⁶⁵ Though not always, God “often manifests his readiness to hear prayer, by giving an answer so speedily, sometimes while they are yet speaking, and sometimes before they pray.” Edwards also notes that if “God defers for the present to answer the prayer of faith, it is not from any backwardness to answer, but for the good of his people sometimes, that they may be better prepared for the mercy before they receive it, or because another time would be the best and fittest on some other account.”

Third, “by his giving *so liberally* in answer to prayer.”⁶⁶ Citing James 1: 5, 6, Edwards attests that “God both gives liberally, and upbraids us not with our undeservings,”⁶⁷ and that “Sometimes, God not only gives the thing asked, but he gives them more than is asked. So he did to Solomon.”⁶⁸

Fourth, “by the *greatness* of the things which he hath often done in answer to prayer.”⁶⁹ In this section Edwards demonstrates his mastery of the Scripture, for he explains this point purely by excerpting and integrating biblical narratives. John Gerstner is thus correct to suggest that “‘Edwards’ reputation may be enhanced by his intimate familiarity with and constant interweaving of the sacred text in its most eloquent translation, the King James Version.”⁷⁰ To prove this, Edwards shows God’s greatness in answer to prayer:

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., (*italics his*).

⁶⁶ Ibid., (*italics his*).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 115 (*italics his*).

⁷⁰ Cited in Kreider, “Jonathan Edwards’s Theology of Prayer,” 437.

Thus, when Esau was coming out against his brother Jacob, with four hundred men, without doubt fully resolved to cut him off, Jacob prayed and God turned the heart of Esau, so that he met Jacob in a very friendly manner; Gen. xxxii. So in Egypt, at the prayer of Moses, God brought those dreadful plagues, and at his prayer removed them again....Joshua prayed to God, and said, “Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon, and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon;” and God heard his prayer, and caused the sun and moon to stand still accordingly.⁷¹

Finally, “in that God, as it were, *overcome* by prayer.”⁷² When God’s people pray and God hears them, it is as if he is overcome by their prayer. Prayer “has a great power in it; such a prayer-hearing God is the Most High, that he graciously manifests himself as conquered by it.”⁷³ For instance, “when his anger was provoked against Israel, and he appeared to be ready to consume them in his hot displeasure, Moses stood in the gap, and by his humble and earnest prayer and supplication averted the stroke of divine vengeance.”⁷⁴

C. Doctrine distinguished

After defining and displaying this doctrine, Edwards begins to distinguish it from other doctrines of other religions whose gods are but false gods, and therefore cannot hear prayer. Edwards opens this section by saying: “Herein the most high God is *distinguished* from false gods. The true God is the only one of this character; there is no other of whom it may be said, that he *heareth prayer*.”⁷⁵ Then he proceeds to argue:

Many are those things that are worshipped as gods are *idols* made by their worshippers; mere stocks and stones that know nothing. They are indeed made with ears; but they hear not the prayers of them that cry to them.... Others, though not the works of men’s hands, yet are things *without life*. Thus, many worship the sun, moon, and stars, which, though glorious creatures, yet are not capable of knowing any thing of the wants and desires of those who pray to them. Some

⁷¹ Edwards, “The Most High, A Prayer-Hearing God,” 115.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 115 (italics his).

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, (italics his).

worship certain kinds of animals, as the Egyptians were wont to worship bulls, which, though not without life, yet are destitute of that reason whereby they would be capable of knowing the requests of their worshippers. Others worship *devils* instead of the true God.... These though beings of great powers, have not knowledge necessary to capacitate them fully to understand the state, circumstances, necessities, and desires of those who pray to them.⁷⁶

In contrast, “the true God perfectly knows the circumstances of every one that prays to him throughout the world.” Edwards beautifully appends: “Though millions pray to him at once, in different parts of the world, it is no more difficult for him who is infinite in knowledge, to take notice of all than of one alone.”⁷⁷ In reality “God is so perfect in knowledge, that he doth not need to be informed by us, in order to a knowledge of our wants; for he knows what things we need before we ask him.”⁷⁸ On this Kreider comments: “These statements seem to indicate Edwards’s conviction that God’s knowledge of human decisions stands prior to the exercise of the human will, that God’s knowledge extends to the choices that creatures have not yet made. God’s knowledge extends not only to the entire realm of possible choices humans might make, but even extends to the actual choices they will make.”⁷⁹

D. Doctrine defended

At the last point of his original outline,⁸⁰ Edwards defends his doctrine that God hears prayer. He does so by raising and answering two inquiries. First, “Why God requires prayer in order to the bestowment of mercies?”⁸¹ Before Edwards addresses this question, he corrects the

⁷⁶ Ibid., (italics his).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Kreider, “Jonathan Edwards’s Theology of Prayer,” 442.

⁸⁰ *The Most High, A Prayer-Hearing God* is divided into four major parts, as Edwards says: “I shall handle this point [i.e. that God hears prayer] in the following method: 1. Show that the Most High is a God *that hears prayer*. 2. That he is *eminently* such a God. 3. That herein he is *distinguished* from all false gods. 4. Give the *reasons* of the doctrine. See Ibid., 114 (italics his).

⁸¹ Ibid., 115.

question that God does not require us to pray in order that he might be informed of our petitions for “God never gains any knowledge by information.”⁸² “He is omniscient, and with respect to his knowledge unchangeable.”⁸³ Edwards goes on to reason:

He knows what we want, a thousand times more perfectly than we do ourselves, before we ask him for though, speaking after the manner of men, God is sometimes represented as if he were moved and persuaded by the prayers of his people; yet is not to be thought that God is properly moved or made willing by our prayers; for it is no more possible that there should be any new inclination or will in God, than new knowledge. The mercy of God is not moved or dawn by any thing in the creature; but the spring of God’s beneficence is within himself only; he is self-moved; and whatsoever mercy he bestows, the reason and ground of it is not to be sought for in the creature, but in God’s own good pleasure.⁸⁴

So why then does God require prayer in order to bestow his mercy? Edwards gives two answers, the one pertains to God, and the other to ourselves. First, “With respect to *God*, prayer is but a sensible acknowledgement of our dependence on him to his glory. As he hath made all things for his own glory, so he will be glorified and acknowledged by his creatures; and it is fit that he should require this of those who would be the subjects of his mercy. That we, when we desire to receive any mercy from him, should humbly supplicate the Divine Being for the bestowment of that mercy, is but a suitable acknowledgment of our dependence on the power and mercy of God for that which we need.”⁸⁵ And second, “With respect to ourselves, says Edwards, “God requires prayer of us in order to the bestowment of mercy, because it tends to prepare us for its reception. Fervent prayer many ways tends to prepare the heart.... Our prayer to God may excite in us a suitable sense and consideration of our dependence on God for the

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 115-6.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 116.

mercy we ask, and a suitable exercise of faith in God's sufficiency, that so we may be prepared to glorify his name when the mercy is received."⁸⁶

The second question that Edwards answers as a way of contending for his doctrine is that "Why is God *so ready* to hear the prayers of men?"⁸⁷ Edwards provides two replies: (1) "Because he is God of infinite grace and mercy." In other words, God hears our prayers, ultimately not because of our prayers themselves but because of his grace and mercy on us. Edwards continues: "It is indeed a very wonderful thing, that so great a God should be so ready to hear our prayers, though we are so despicable and unworthy : that he should give free access at all times to every one; should allow us to importunate without esteeming it an indecent boldness; should be so rich in mercy to them that call upon him; that worms of the dust should have such power with God by prayer."⁸⁸ God's answer to our prayers "cannot be from any need that God stands in of us; for our goodness extendeth not to him....But it is because God delights in mercy and condescension."⁸⁹ Here as Edwards sees more of his misery, he sees more of God's mercy in his life. (2) God is so ready to hear our prayer because "We have a glorious Mediator, who has prepared the way, that our prayers may be heard consistently with the honour of God's justice and majesty. Not only has God in himself mercy sufficient for this, but the Mediator has provided that this mercy may be exercised consistently with the divine honour..." And that "this Mediator hath done three things to make way for the hearing of our prayers. [1] He hath by his blood made *atonement* for sin; so that our guilt need not stand in the way, as a separating wall between God and us, and that our sins might not be a cloud through which our prayers cannot pass.... [2] Christ, by his obedience, has *purchased* this privilege, viz. that the prayers of those

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., (*italics his*).

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

who believe in him should be heard. He has not only removed the obstacles to our prayers, but has merited a hearing of them...[3] Christ enforces the prayers of his people, by his *intercession* at the right hand of God in heaven.”⁹⁰ Here Edwards flashes his Christ-centered theology of prayer. Kreider also notes: “Edwards’ Christocentric theology is clearly evidenced here”⁹¹ and “forms the foundation for his theology of prayer.”⁹² For Edwards, it is impossible to come to God without the Mediator Jesus. Yes, “God would have been infinitely gracious if there had been no Mediator; but the way to the mercy-seat would have been blocked up.”⁹³

E. Doctrine applied

As typical to Edwards’ other sermons, *The Most High, A Prayer-Hearing God* ends with an extensive application. As a way of applying this doctrine and actually concluding the message itself, Edwards reminds his audience of the great privilege they have to pray to God through Christ:

Hence we may learn how highly we are privileged, in that we have the Most High revealed to us, who is a God that heareth prayer. The greater part of mankind are destitute of this privilege. Whatever their necessities are, whatever their calamities or sorrows, they have no prayer-hearing God to whom they may go...How highly privileged are we, in that we have the holy word of this same God, to direct us how to seek for mercy! And whatever difficulties or distress we are in, we may go to him with confidence and great encouragement. What a comfort may this be to us! and what reason have we to rejoice in our privilege, to prize them so highly...⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Ibid., (italics his).

⁹¹ Kreider, “Jonathan Edwards’s Theology of Prayer,” 444.

⁹² Ibid., 454.

⁹³ Edwards, “The Most High, A Prayer-Hearing God,” 116.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 116-7.

Edwards deals with one objection that he thinks may hinder his listeners from applying this doctrine. The objection reads: “I have often prayed to God for certain mercies and he has not heard my prayers,”⁹⁵ to which Edwards replies:

First, “It is no argument, that God is not a prayer-hearing God, if he give not to men *what they ask* of him to consume upon their lusts. Oftentimes when men pray for temporal good things, they desire them for no good end, but only to gratify their pride or sensuality. If they pray for worldly good things chiefly from a worldly spirit; and make idol of the world; it is no wonder that God doth not hear their prayers.”⁹⁶

Second, “It is not no argument that God is not a prayer-hearing God, that he heareth not *insincere* and *unbelieving* prayers.”⁹⁷ Edwards asks: “How can we expect that he should have any respect to that which has no sincerity in it? God looketh not at words, but at the heart; and it is fit that he should do so [that is, not answer our hypocritical and doubting prayers].”⁹⁸

Third, “it is no argument that he is not a prayer-hearing God, that he exercises *his own wisdom* as to the time and manner of answering prayer.”⁹⁹ The seeming an unanswered prayer may just mean that it is not yet God’s perfect time to grant that petition. Edwards exhorts that “The business of prayer is not to direct God, who is infinitely wise, and needs not any of our directions; who knows what is best for us ten thousand times better than we, and knows what time and what way are best. It is fit that he should answer prayer, and, as an infinitely wise God, in the exercise of his own wisdom, and not ours.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Ibid., 117.

⁹⁶ Ibid., (italics his).

⁹⁷ Ibid., (italics his).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., (italics his).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Having cleared up the objection, Edwards reproves those who still find an excuse to neglect this duty and privilege to pray. With convicting words, he declares: “If we enjoy so great a privilege as to have the prayer-hearing God revealed to us, how great will be our folly and inexcusableness, if we neglect the privilege, or make no use of it, and deprive ourselves of the advantage by not seeking this God by prayer....What account can those persons give of themselves, who neglect so known a duty? It is impossible that any among us should be ignorant of this command of God. How daring, therefore, is their wickedness who live in the neglect of this duty! and what can they answer to their Judge, when he shall call them to an account for it?”¹⁰¹

The sermon did not close here, though it would have been a good place to end. Edwards foresaw another possible objection—“If I do pray, my prayer will not be the prayer of faith [and thus will not be heard], because I am in a natural condition, and have no faith.”¹⁰² This protestation came out of Edwards’ previous assertion that “*God always hears the prayer Of FAITH,*”¹⁰³ Apparently those who doubt their faith in God may argue that it is pointless for them to pray since God will not listen to faithless prayer. But this reasoning, for Edwards, “excuses not from obedience to a plain command of God. God not only directs godly persons to pray, but others also.”¹⁰⁴ In short, they still ought to pray on account of God’s command. To pray is a command. Moreover, “God not only directs godly persons to pray, but others also.”¹⁰⁵ Besides, Edwards fleshes out:

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., (italics his).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

God is pleased sometimes to answer the prayers of unbelievers. Indeed he hears not their prayers for their goodness or acceptableness, or because of any true respect to him manifested in them, for there is none; nor has he obliged himself to answer such prayers; yet he is pleased sometimes, of his sovereign mercy, to pity wicked men, and hear their cries. Thus he heard the cries of the Ninevites, (Jonah iii.) and the prayer of Ahab, 1 Kings xxi. 27, 28. Though there be no regard to God in their prayers, yet he, of his infinite grace, is pleased to have respect to their desires of their own happiness, and to grant their requests. He may, and sometimes does, hear the cries of wicked men, as he hears the hungry ravens, when they cry, Psal. cxlvii. 9. And he opens his bountiful hand, and satisfies the desires of every living thing, Psal. cxlv. 16. Besides the prayers of sinners, though they have no goodness in them, yet are made a means of a preparation for mercy.¹⁰⁶

Finally, Edwards concludes with a brief but compelling challenge: “Seeing we have such a prayer-hearing God as we have heard, let us be much employed in the duty of prayer: let us pray with all prayer and supplication: let us live prayerful lives, continuing instant in prayer, watching thereunto with all perseverance; praying always, without ceasing, earnestly, and not fainting.”¹⁰⁷

Summary

To encapsulate Edwards’ doctrine of prayer, the following points can be noted:

First, his doctrine of prayer is based on a simple and yet profound truth that God hears prayer. Beck also concludes that “Edwards’s theology of prayer proves to be quite simple in expression but profound in implication. Christians pray. God hears. Christians need. God supplies. Christians trust. God responds.”¹⁰⁸ If one would ask Edwards why he prayed, the answer would probably be simply because of this basic theological fact that God hears prayer. Edwards practiced prayer, because he believed God hears prayer.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Beck, “The Voice of Faith: Jonathan Edwards’s Theology of Prayer,” 17-18.

Second, his doctrine of prayer is anchored in the Scripture, God the Father, and God the Son.¹⁰⁹ That is to say, (1) God answers prayer in agreement with his own word. Edwards maintains that God will not listen to prayer that is “any further than he has promised in his word.”¹¹⁰ Thus, no one who prays outside the Scripture’s parameter must claim God’s answer. (2) God hears prayer in harmony with his character as a merciful and gracious Father. “This is very wonderful, when we consider the distance between God and us, and how we have provoked him by our sins, and how unworthy we are of the least gracious notice.”¹¹¹ If God answers us it is not really because of our prayers, but “because God delights in mercy and condescension”¹¹² to pour out his blessing upon us in response to our prayers. (3) God hears prayer in accord with his Son, “Through whom we may come to God for mercy.”¹¹³ Edwards preaches that “Our prayers would be of no account, and of no avail with God, were it not for the merits of Christ.”¹¹⁴ “His merits are the incense that is offered with the prayers of the saints, which render them a sweet savour to God, and acceptable in his sight. Hence the prayers of the saints have such power with God.”¹¹⁵

Thus, his doctrine is Scripture, God, and Christ-centered.

Third, his doctrine of prayer is grounded in a biblically balanced view of divine sovereignty and human duty to pray. Though notoriously difficult to comprehend, Edwards tried

¹⁰⁹ But of course this does not mean that Edwards was anti-Trinity, and that his credo of prayer is not pneumatological. In fact, as Beck contends “Edwards believed that an accurate theology of prayer requires a right understanding...of the Trinity.” (Abstract to *Ibid.*) And as we shall see in the next chapter, Edwards actually gave special emphasis on the Holy Spirit in prayer.

¹¹⁰ Edwards, “The Most High, A Prayer-Hearing God,” 114.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

to reconcile the seeming tension between these two. As seen in his *Personal Narratives*, Edwards undoubtedly held that God is in total control of everything, and that whatever he has decreed will surely come to pass. God is absolutely powerful. And yet Edwards insisted that prayer “has a great power in it” in which the “Most High...manifests himself as conquered by it.”¹¹⁶ God is sovereign and yet as Edwards understood it—“God is, as it were, *overcome* by prayer.”¹¹⁷ God is immutable, and yet it appears in human eyes that he is moved by prayer. However, aware of the possible misconception, Edwards made it plain that “though, speaking after the manner of men, God is sometimes represented as if he were moved and persuaded by the prayers of his people; yet is not to be thought that God is properly moved or made willing by our prayers; for it is no more possible that there should be any new inclination or will in God, than new knowledge. The mercy of God is not moved or drawn by any thing in the creature; but the spring of God’s beneficence is within himself only; he is self-moved...”¹¹⁸ In another sermon, Edwards states: “We don’t cause God’s ear to hear, but he causes it.”¹¹⁹ We do not pray to change God’s mind, in the first place, his mind cannot be changed. The truth is, for Edwards, it is our prayer to God that actually changes us.¹²⁰ God is omniscient; “he doth not need to be informed by us, in order to a knowledge of our wants; for he knows what things we need before we ask him.” And yet Edwards strongly admonished his congregation to pray. Yes, God is sovereign, unchangeable, and all-knowing, but this does not excuse us from praying. It is our duty to pray! And as Edwards bluntly says: “They who live without prayer live like atheists or like brute creatures.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 115.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 116.

¹¹⁹ Jonathan Edwards, “God’s Manner Is First to Prepare Men’s Heart and Then to Answer Their Prayers,” in *The Glory and Honor of God*, ed. Michael D. McMullen vol. 2 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2004), 78. Edwards adds: “The mercy of God towards his people is not moved or drawn by them but ‘tis self-moved. It has its beginning, its first spring, on God himself, and the cause of it is not to be sought in the creature,” (Ibid.).

¹²⁰ See Nichols, *Jonathan Edwards: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thoughts*, 210.

They live as if there were no God, as if they had no souls and had nothing to do with God and had no need of his favor.”¹²¹

Hence, we see how Edwards sought to balance God’s sovereignty and human responsibility in prayer. His argument may not satisfy us, but he should be commended for his effort to address this crucial matter.

Fourth, his doctrine of prayer is focused on God’s glory. While it is our duty to pray, we pray ultimately for God’s delight. Likewise, God hears our prayer for the primary purpose of his own glory. “Whatsoever mercy he bestows, the reason and ground of it is not to be sought for in the creature, but in God’s own good pleasure,” claims Edwards.¹²² God is being glorified by himself to answer our prayers. He “manifests himself as delighting in being sought to by prayer.”¹²³ He delights in it because it is his appointed means to shower his mercies in his providence. ““God has been pleased to constitute prayer to be antecedent to the bestowment of mercy, and he is pleased to bestow mercy in consequence of prayer,”” Edwards writes.¹²⁴ Moreover, God delights in prayer because it is where his creatures most fully acknowledge their “dependence on him to his glory.”¹²⁵

Thus Beck’s pronouncement, “according to Edwards’s theology of prayer, true prayer, that which is the voice of faith, focuses its attention upon God in all his magnificent glory.”¹²⁶

¹²¹ Edwards, “God’s Manner Is First to Prepare Men’s Heart and Then to Answer Their Prayers,” 89.

¹²² Edwards, “The Most High, A Prayer-Hearing God,” 116.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹²⁴ Cited in Nichols, *Jonathan Edwards: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thoughts*, 210.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹²⁶ Beck, “The Voice of Faith: Jonathan Edwards’s Theology of Prayer,” 8.

IV. Distinct Emphasis on the Holy Spirit in Prayer

Roy Walter Williams avouches that “experiential pneumatology” is a “unique contribution of the Puritans.”¹²⁷ He further argues that “the economy of the Holy Spirit in prayer was a central concept for both Puritan doctrine of the Christian life and the worship of the church.”¹²⁸ This is very true to the last Puritan Edwards, who according to Haykin “was deeply indebted to the passionate interest that seventeenth-century Puritanism had in the work of the Holy Spirit.”¹²⁹ And Beck, who has done an extensive study on Edwards’ theology of prayer, indicates that Edwards’ pneumatic emphasis on prayer is “the most distinctive and most important part of his theology of prayer.”¹³⁰

In the previous chapter, we have pointed out how Edwards’ doctrine of prayer is theocentric¹³¹ as well as Christocentric. However, for Edwards, “our communication with God the Father and God the Son consists in our possessing of the Holy Ghost, which is their Spirit.”¹³² Christoph Ehrat, commenting on this point, speaks that “It is this divine Spirit dwelling in our hearts who takes us into the blessed, unsearchable fellowship of the Trinity.”¹³³ Hence, “All three Persons of the Trinity play a vital role in Edwards’s theology of prayer. God expects, hears, and answers prayer. Christ mediates and facilitates prayer. The Holy Spirit motivates believers to prayer.”¹³⁴

¹²⁷ Roy Walter Williams, “The Puritan Concept and Practice of Prayer” (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1982), 81.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹²⁹ Haykin, *A Sweet Flame: Piety in the Letters of Jonathan Edwards*, 1-2.

¹³⁰ Beck said this to me in our email conversation.

¹³¹ I use this term to particularly refer to God the Father.

¹³² Cited in Christoph Ehrat, “Jonathan Edwards’ Treatise Concerning Religious Affections and Its Application to Prayer,” *Crux* 24 (1988), 15.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Beck, “The Voice of Faith: Jonathan Edwards’s Theology of Prayer,” 160.

A. The Holy Spirit as “the true spirit of prayer”

In his sermon *Hypocrites Deficient in the Duty of Prayer* (1740), Edwards rebukes those who pray hypocritically, those who neglect the duty of secret prayer. One reason he gives as to their manner is that “Hypocrites never had the spirit of prayer.”¹³⁵ “They may have been stirred up to the external performance of this duty, and that with a great deal of earnestness and affection, and yet always have been destitute of the true spirit of prayer.”¹³⁶ For Edwards, “the true spirit of prayer is a holy spirit, a gracious spirit.”¹³⁷ He further expounds: “The true spirit of prayer is no other than God’s own spirit dwelling in the hearts of the saints.”¹³⁸ Thus, for Edwards, the Holy Spirit is the essence of prayer without whom no one can pray. The Holy Spirit makes intercession for us. In some respect he indites our prayers or dictates us to pray, and leads us to pour out our souls before God.¹³⁹ There will be no true prayer without the Holy Spirit, for he is “the true spirit of prayer.” Ehrat expresses it this way:

As there is no true spiritual life without our being profoundly affected by the Holy Spirit, so there is no genuine prayer life without the Holy Spirit’s operating in our hearts. It is God’s Spirit abiding in us, not some ability that we have in ourselves, who is the source of a rich prayer life. Prayer then becomes a celebration and practice of the presence of the Holy Spirit, which fundamentally differs from an approach that emphasizes techniques, postures and certain formulas.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ Jonathan Edwards, “Hypocrites Deficient in the Duty of Prayer,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, ed. Edward Hickman (1834; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 72.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ehrat, “Jonathan Edwards’ Treatise Concerning Religious Affections and its Application to Prayer,” 15.

B. The Holy Spirit as “the greatest blessing that can be asked”

Edwards’ pneumatic stress on prayer is also conspicuous in his preachment called *Praying for the Spirit* (1740). It is a sermon based on Luke 11:3: “How much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him.” From this verse Edwards asseverates that “the Holy Spirit...is the greatest blessing that can be asked.”¹⁴¹ He is the greatest blessing because it is by him that “we are sanctified and quicked [or made alive].” It is by him that “we have spiritual life.” It is by him that “we are conformed to God and have his image, and have the redemption of Christ applied to us and so are possessed of all the blessings of his purchase.” “In short, it is by him that “we are actually possessed of true holiness and happiness.”¹⁴² He is the “sum of all blessings.”¹⁴³ Thus, Edwards would exhort his listeners, believers and unbelievers alike to make the Holy Spirit the supreme object of their prayers, because the Holy Spirit, for him, is “the sum of the blessings that Christians have to pray for.”¹⁴⁴

C. The Holy Spirit as “the chief subject matter of prayer”

If the Holy Spirit is the true spirit of prayer, and the greatest blessing that can be asked, it is then no surprise that Edwards considers the Spirit of God “the chief subject matter of prayer.”¹⁴⁵ He is, in Beck’s words, “the Alpha and Omega of prayer, the totality of all that duty entails.”¹⁴⁶ Thus, the person as well as the work of the Spirit is central to Edwards’ theology of

¹⁴¹ Jonathan Edwards, “Praying for the Spirit,” in *Sermon and Discourses 1739-1742*, vol. 22 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Harry S. Stout, Nathan O. Hatch, and Kyle P. Farley (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 214.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Cited in Beck, “The Voice of Faith: Jonathan Edwards’s Theology of Prayer,” 198.

¹⁴⁴ Cited in Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Jonathan Edwards, “Suitableness of Union in Extraordinary Prayer,” in *Sermons and Discourses 1743-1758*, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach, vol. 25 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Harry S. Stout (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 203.

¹⁴⁶ Beck, “The Voice of Faith: Jonathan Edwards’s Theology of Prayer,” 198.

prayer. “Let all [therefore] cry for the pouring out of the Spirit on their own souls and on others,” implores Edwards.¹⁴⁷ Pray for the Spirit!

V. Derived Lessons from His Prayer Life

Perhaps the most important part of this paper is this section that seeks to answer the question—“what lessons can we glean from Edwards as a remarkable man of prayer?” However, one must realize that Edwards was a uniquely gifted person, and that there was only one Edwards in this world. Therefore, as Whitney says, “In one sense, it’s foolish to try to imitate Edwards. He was a genius.”¹⁴⁸ Moreover, Edwards was also a sinner like us. He had weaknesses too. Nevertheless, there are things that we can learn from him. First, *his devotion and discipline in prayer*. His private prayer life was indeed a reflection of this devotedly disciplined life. The fact that he was able to spend considerable time in secret, despite the nature of his work as a father, pastor, teacher, and writer confirms this truth. What he was in public was a result of his close converse with God. If he was now a great theologian, it was because he spent great amount of time to the Lord in prayer. As such, he could preach, by God’s grace, with all boldness and clear conscience against those hypocrites who shrugged off the duty of secret prayer. He was not hesitant to do so, because he practiced what he preached. Another example that we can follow from his life is *his delight in the Three Persons of God in prayer*. The Triune God was so dear to him. He loved him, and so he enjoyed talking to him. He prayed not only to ask a gift, but also to give God glory. He used prayer as a means of not only pleading for God’s mercy, but also praising God for such mercy. Prayer is an act of praise and worship. Finally, we must not forget

¹⁴⁷ Edwards, “Praying for the Spirit,” 222.

¹⁴⁸ Whitney, “Pursuing A Passion For God Through Spiritual Disciples: Learning From Jonathan Edwards,” 125.

that his deep devotion and delight in prayer, was a fruit of *his diligence in his study of the Scripture*. Prayer and God's Word were inseparable for Edwards. He knew that it was impossible to grow in prayer apart from a proper knowledge of the Holy Word. He bled the Bible, so to speak, to get the true blood of prayer, and this blood was flowing into his spiritual vein. Thus, as this blood flowed naturally into his vein, so did his prayer from his mind and heart. He could therefore say: "Prayer seemed to be natural to me, as a breath by which the inward burnings of my heart had vent."¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Dwight, "Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards," xiii.

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