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Jonathan Edwards on Joy

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As a youngster, Jonathan Edwards, the early eighteenth-century New England theologian, pastor, revivalist, missionary and college president, was “uncommonly terrified with thunder.” He admitted, “it used to strike me with terror, when I saw a thunderstorm rising,” because it reminded him of the all-powerful and seemingly arbitrary God whose sovereignty he then resented. But after his “sense of divine things” grew, he had a very different reaction to thunder and lightning: “it rejoiced me,” he writes in his *Personal Narrative* of 1740.

I felt God at the first appearance of a thunderstorm. And used to take the opportunity at such time, to fix myself to view the clouds, and see the lightnings play, and hear the majestic and awful voice of God’s thunder: which oftentimes was exceeding entertaining, leading me to sweet contemplations of my great and glorious God. And while I viewed, used to spend my time, as it always seemed natural to me, to sing or chant forth my meditations; to speak my thoughts in soliloquies, and speak with a singing voice.

This striking passage gives us an intimate glimpse into Edwards’ devotional practices, but also shows how, for him, joy could be found, inspired, or given. Joy was a state engendered by an encounter with God, particularly since, for Edwards, all reality was sustained moment-by-moment through divine will. And since God, as Edwards conceived, was a communicating Being, believers could be recipients of “a divine and supernatural light” that brought joy, or, as Edwards alternatively described it in a very empirical and sensual way, “sweetness.” Those who partook of
this divine sweetness were in turn participants in divine fullness (thus we see much interest among scholars today in Edwards’ doctrines of union, participation and theosis).

In reaction to materialist and determinist philosophies, Edwards posited that true substance was not physical but spiritual. “Solidity” was not a property of bodies; rather, solidity was a manifestation of the divine mind at work, maintaining objects and universal laws. “All that is real,” Edwards wrote, “is immediately in the first being,” or God. It then followed for Edwards that “the nearer in nature beings are to God,” the more “substantial” or real they are. Thus, souls that are conformed to the image of God’s holiness have “more being” than those that are motivated by self-love. And it was, paradoxically, in this conformity to God, this relationality, or “consent of being to Being,” that souls found freedom—and joy.

Edwards recognized the capacity for joy in earthly and human relations as well, though he held these to be of an inferior brand to spiritual and heavenly. Joy could be had from contemplation and observation of nature, from family and friends, from one’s vocation, and from worship, whether individual or collective. Building one’s fund of knowledge in religion was also a source of joy. One of his sermons had as its doctrine, “Every Christian should make a business of endeavoring to grow in knowledge of divinity.” Likewise, new discoveries in science and other areas were gifts of God, and it was the duty and privilege of humankind to seek new learning, methods, and inventions. This also applied to grace. Through the “means of grace,” believers were capable of achieving deeper levels of the knowledge of God. This knowledge was gained only through a process of constant denial of worldly pleasures and self-indulgence, but for Edwards, it was worth it, for the joys of the experience of grace were far beyond anything the world had to offer. In the human experience, true joy, spiritual joy, came through affliction and trial; the two states were, in Edwards’ assumptions, cyclical and co-dependent.
Ultimately, human joy was a category of Beauty, a central theological category for Edwards identifying God and divine “excellencies” (thus, Edwards’ aesthetics is also a thriving topic of study). But there were lesser, even false, brands of joy, and Edwards was constantly warning his generation about them. True, superior, gracious joys were the province only of the regenerate, the enlightened, who were given a “spiritual understanding” above and beyond those who were still in a “natural” state. Edwards therefore privileged the understanding of divine things that the regenerate possessed over the sort of common grace that “natural persons” had.

Worldly wealth and honors could be signs of God’s blessing, but they could just as easily be signs of God’s curse, that God had given up the individual to his or her material pursuits in order to secure their condemnation. Edwards’ theology was no prosperity theology. In an early sermon on Ecclesiastes 2:26, he taught, “’Tis to the godly alone that God gives wisdom and understanding to know how to use the worldly good things they possess, and that he enables truly to enjoy the comfort of them,” and conversely, “God gives wicked men the travail and vexation of gathering and heaping [up] worldly good things, but ‘tis not for their own but the godly’s benefit.” He bore witness against the proto-capitalist business practices of his day that, to his mind, compromised Christian obligation to fairness and charity.

Yet, to dismiss Edwards as a stereotypically ascetic puritan is unfair. His piety has been called mystical and his view of religious experience comprehended the ecstatic. Also, he saw in creation, in nature, typological “images and shadows.” Objects and phenomena in nature signified, especially to the regenerate mind, divine truths confirmed in Scripture. “I believe the whole universe,” he wrote,
to be full of images of divine things, as full as a language is of words; and . . . that there is room for persons to be learning more and more of this language and seeing more of that which is declared in it to the end of the world without discovering all.

So unique was Edwards in this regard that some scholars have found in his natural typology, in combination with his ethics, an unlikely resource for eco-theology.

But the greatest thing that believers and the church could experience in this life was the “outpouring” of the Holy Spirit in conversion, a phenomena most manifest in Edwards’ lifetime during what came to be called the “Great Awakening” of the 1740s, which set a precedent for revivals in modern times. As Edwards stated in a sermon from that period, "When a company or society of Christians have Christ present with them, 'tis the greatest cause of joy to them.” For much of his career, Edwards worked to encourage revival, which he saw as an engine propelling sacred history, God’s sovereign plan. Edwards laid out his vision of God’s progressive covenantal revelation through time, culminating in the creation of the new heavens and the new earth, in *A History of the Work of Redemption*.

Related to the experience of joy in Edwards’ thought, and perhaps overarching it, was the category of happiness. In Edwards’ time, moral philosophers were arguing that the end or purpose of humans was their own happiness. For Edwards, this fell far short of the mark, for any ethical scheme in which God was not the primary reference point was meaningless. In a sermon delivered during the “Great Awakening,” he observed,

The ancient philosophers were greatly divided in their opinions concerning man’s chief happiness; more than three hundred different opinions are reckoned up. But these are no argument that there is no such thing as true happiness.
Edwards certainly held that “a good man is a happy man, no matter what his circumstances.” But his solution to true human happiness—in many ways a classically Reformed one—was to place it in relation to giving glory to God. An early entry in his “Miscellanies,” his private theological and philosophical notebooks, treats this ethic of happiness as a cause of rejoicing:

**HAPPINESS IS THE END OF THE CREATION**, as appears by this, because the creation had as good not be, as not rejoice in its being. For certainly it was the goodness of the Creator that moved him to create; and how can we conceive of another end proposed by goodness, than that he might delight in seeing the creatures he made rejoice in that being that he has given them?

It appears also by this, because the end of the creation is that the creation might glorify him. Now what is glorifying God, but a rejoicing at that glory he has displayed? An understanding of the perfections of God, merely, cannot be the end of the creation; for he had as good not understand it, as see it and not be at all moved with joy at the sight. Neither can the highest end of the creation be the declaring God's glory to others; for the declaring God's glory is good for nothing otherwise than to raise joy in ourselves and others at what is declared.

Wherefore, seeing happiness is the highest end of the creation of the universe, and intelligent beings are that consciousness of the creation that is to be the immediate subject of this happiness, how happy may we conclude will be those intelligent beings that are to be made eternally happy!

Edwards waxes most poetic about joy and happiness in his descriptions of the state of the exalted saints in heaven, who, swept up into intimate communion with the Godhead, will be “ravished” by sights of God and Christ, who will commune and feast with them in the human
nature. The happiness of the saints, however, came at a cost: for Edwards also held that those who in their earthly lives contented themselves with worldly pleasures and ignored the joys of grace were subject to the eternal wrath of God the Judge in hell. The saints in heaven and the damned in hell will be able to view each other in eternity, providing to each poignant demonstrations of divine grace and justice. While the bodies of the damned will endure perfect misery and pain, the “refined” bodies of the saints in heaven will enjoy perfect health and harmony, “filled with pleasures of the most exquisite kind,” which will “prompt and help it in spiritual delights.” The “pleasures of the body” shall “assist those of the mind,” and encourage greater degrees of activity and knowledge. This points to Edwards’ beatific vision of heaven as dynamic and progressive, epitomized in his sermon entitled “Heaven is a World of Love.” The glorified state will be one in which the saints will enjoy continuing revelations of the wisdom of God and dwell in bliss.

For Edwards, that ultimate happiness, and the joys that accompanied it, was not achieved without suffering, sacrifice—and some terror—along the way. But in doing all for God’s glory, humankind found its “end.”