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The Eschatology of Jonathan Edwards

Christopher B. Holdsworth

In the theology of Jonathan Edwards, comprehensive as it is, one doctrine seems in particular to permeate the whole: that of eschatology, the doctrine of the last things. It colors his thinking on unfulfilled prophecy, on missionary interests, on revivals, prayer, the papacy, false religion, history, and the Jews. He contemplated at length the subjects of a latter-day glory, and of heaven and hell. Today, Jonathan Edwards would be known as a postmillennialist. "In his *Work of Redemption*," says J. Marcellus Kik, "he gives a fine exposition of the post-mil position."¹ While such labels may be inappropriate to eighteenth-century theology, there is no doubt that Edwards did not expect Christ to return until after a period of peace and prosperity for the church on earth: a millennium to be ushered in by such a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit that the revivals of the Great Awakening would be seen to be but a foreshadowing by contrast.

One area of continual study for Jonathan Edwards was the Apocalypse of John. The one book upon which John Calvin does not have a commentary was the only one upon which Jonathan Edwards has, although, of course, he wrote much on many Scriptures. His notes indicate various sources, but most significantly Moses Lowman, the author of *Paraphrases and Notes on the Revelation* (1737). As Stephen J. Stein indicates, "Edwards struggled mightily in his notebook with the interpretation of Lowman."² Edwards was, however, an original thinker, and no slavish follower to his sources. He refused to endorse Lowman's identification of Constantine as one of the heads of the Beast (Rev. 12:3), believing Constantine to be God's chosen vessel for the protection of God's people. Also, in his "Remarks on Lowman,"³ Edwards thoroughly refutes the idea that the three woes of Revelation 8:13ff. represent periods of the prevailing of the Saracens; rather he emphasizes that these

woes were not against the church, but against her enemies. In point of fact, “Mr. Lowman confounds the order of the prophecies of this book.”⁴ Perry Miller has rightly observed that in America, Jonathan Edwards was “the greatest artist of the apocalypse.”⁵

A typical English nonconformist, Moses Lowman was staunchly anti-Catholic. Descended from the New England Puritans, Jonathan Edwards shared this in common with the Englishman. The conflicts of his century he saw very much as a part of the ongoing struggle with Antichrist. The greatest hindrance to the work of the church of Jesus Christ was the Church of Rome, which he called “a viper or some loathsome poisonous, crawling monster.”⁶

Such thinking does not allow for the concept of a personal Antichrist, although at any stage in her history the Church of Rome is most obviously headed up in the pope. In Revelation 13:5, the Beast is found “speaking great things and blasphemies.” This Jonathan Edwards applies to the pope: “He arrogates to himself the power and prerogatives of God and pretends to the same power over the church as Jesus Christ hath.”⁷

That the great whore of Revelation 17, represented also as Babylon, is one and the same with the Church of Rome, Edwards is in no doubt. “And the woman which thou sawest is that great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth” (verse 18). “This verse,” he says, “is spoken the plainest of any one passage in the whole book.”⁸ He mocks the “miracles” of popes:⁹ their bulls and anathemas, the mass, infallibility, delivering from purgatory, the pardon of sin, dispensations and indulgences, exorcism, and a power to infuse holiness into inanimate things such as water!

As to the Church of England, she seems to be in the like case to Rome. The words of Christ to Pergamos, “Where thou dwellest, even where Satan’s seat is” (Rev. 2:13), seem “very well to suit the church of England.”¹⁰ This was written

more than two hundred years before the New Age Movement infiltrated that branch of the visible church of Christ!

Ultimately, though, “Antichrist shall be exceedingly plagued by means of the saints.”¹¹ Two blows have already been struck: the first by Huss and Wycliffe, the second in the Reformation. Elsewhere Jonathan Edwards goes so far as to say, “if the 6th vial hasn’t already begun to be poured out, it may well be speedily expected.”¹² It is the light of the Gospel which will destroy the kingdom of darkness: “Their life, as they were papists, was taken away by the sword, which is the Word of God,” he says of Revelation 19:21.¹³

There might appear to be a contradiction between the idea of there being two blows so far dealt to Antichrist, and yet the sixth vial being about to be poured out. This seems to be a development in Edwards’s thinking as he became more and more influenced by the scheme outlined by Moses Lowman. Edwards believed he was beginning to see the invasion of the papal dominions, and kept an enthusiastic watch on the unfolding political drama of his own day.

If I heard the least hint of anything that happened in any part of the world, that appeared to me, in some respect or other, to have a favorable aspect on the interest of Christ’s kingdom. My soul eagerly caught at it; and it would much animate and refresh me.¹⁴

The wars of the 1740s, both in Europe and America, along with the Jacobite uprising in Britain, take on a whole new significance when viewed as part of the ongoing conflict between the true church of Jesus Christ, and that of Rome. When France declared war on Britain in 1744, it was not long before New England itself was involved in a campaign against the French in Nova Scotia. Edwards viewed the fall of Lonesburg and the surrender of Cape Breton as a “dispensation of providence.”¹⁵ However, he warned, the

coalition of France and Spain with the pretender to the British throne might still be a source of chastisement upon the nations of Great Britain. The ensuing misfortunes of the Roman Catholic powers, envisaged as the pouring out of the sixth vial upon the Euphrates River as a type of the revenues and riches of the papacy, brought Edwards some reverential delight and satisfaction.

Paired with this, there seemed to be some evidence that the church was beginning to prosper. Initially Jonathan Edwards hesitated to suggest that the revivals were the beginning of the millennium. It would not have served his pastoral purposes to do so. Then in 1743 he wrote,

It is not unlikely that this work of God's Spirit, so extraordinary and wonderful, is the dawning, or, at least, a prelude of that glorious work of God, so often foretold in Scripture, which in the progress and issue of it, shall renew the world of mankind.¹⁶

Here Jonathan Edwards stands as the link between the earlier Puritan missionary endeavors and the new Protestant world vision which saw the beginning of the modern missionary movement in the person of William Carey. The whole earth was to be "filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea," and Edwards "believed this biblical prophecy was near fulfillment."¹⁷

In fact, the raising up of William Carey and others might be seen as God's answer to a unique concert of prayer which prevailed in Edwards's day. It began in Scotland and was reported to Edwards no doubt by John Robe, or some other of his Scottish correspondents. The response of Jonathan Edwards was to write his *Humble Attempt*. The so-called "Northampton Association" of Baptists in England (so named on account of one of their principal counties rather than through any direct contact with the town of

that name in New England) were very much encouraged by this volume, prior to their sending William Carey to the mission field, as appears by their own preface to a republication of the work.¹⁸

As recently as 1979, Derek Swann gave two addresses on this work at a Welsh Ministers Conference, leading in 1983 to a covenanting of ministers to pray for revival for one hour every Saturday evening.¹⁹

Despite his certainty that God would fulfill the millennial hopes of His people, Edwards never lost sight of the fact that God uses means: prayer and missionary endeavor. Behind this, too, was the question of unfulfilled prophecy, as becomes clear in the preface to his *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections*.²⁰ "Though there never will, in this world, be an entire purity, . . . it is evident there will come a time of much greater purity in the church."²¹ The "evidence" can no doubt be perceived to be a certain understanding of various texts of Scripture which seem to hint at better days as yet unseen on this earth.

The text expounded in the early part of the *Humble Attempt* is Zechariah 8:20-22. This, says Jonathan Edwards, is a prophecy of a "future glorious advancement" of the church of God. After all, it was never fulfilled that "many people and strong nations" ever came to seek the true God before the coming of Messiah—this multitude of all nations "taking hold of the skirts of the Jews" (v. 8). It was never so, in any literal sense, on their return from Babylon: "the Spirit of God has doubtless respect to things far greater than the return of more captives from Chaldea."²²

In the winter of 1734-35, Northampton had been witnessing several surprising conversions. Urgent pastoral business tended to eclipse, at least in Edwards's public ministry, any speculation about the imminence of end times. Yet, about this time, and using Archbishop Ussher's chronology for the age of the earth, Edwards noted the fact

that the number seven is of some significance in Scripture, and concluded that the “seventh thousand year” would see the ushering in of the church’s prosperity (i.e., about 2000 A.D.)²³ In the *Humble Attempt* this matter came to the fore. The latter-day glory was not yet accomplished, and so must be sought after and prayed for.

“There has never yet been any propagation and prevalence of religion, in any wise, of that extent and universality which the prophecies represent.” It was promised to the patriarchs that in their seed “all nations” would be blessed; to the Messiah that “all nations” would serve Him (Ps. 72:11). That Edwards sees this as something more than the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost when, as appears from Acts 2, people of many nations began to be blessed, is quite evident from an allusion to Matthew 13:33, where Christ compares the kingdom of heaven “to leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.” Christ is the “Heir of the World,” not only in the day of judgment, but also in the “ends of the earth” looking to Him “that they might be saved.”²⁴

The time will come, says Edwards, “when there will not be one nation remaining in the world, which shall not embrace the true religion.” Isaiah 60:12 no doubt demonstrates that the nation and kingdom that will not serve God will perish. Heathen idolatry will be destroyed, as appears in Jeremiah 10:11—“While this earth and these heavens remain, i.e. before the end of the world.”²⁵

In the New Testament, Christ says, “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself” (John 12:32). “It is fit,” says Edwards, “that when the Son of God becomes man, He should have dominion over all mankind,” and “possess the whole earth.” There is a difference between the “first-fruits” of Jews and Gentiles in the primitive ages of Christianity (Rom. 11:16), and the later “fullness” of both Jews and Gentiles (vv.12, 25), when “the whole of mankind

shall be brought into the church of Christ.”²⁶

Prior to the dawning of this great age, the kings of the earth and the whole world are represented as gathered together (Rev. 16:14). Then the seventh angel pours out his vial and the kingdom of Satan is overthrown. Christ rides forth to the same great battle as King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev. 19). Satan is shut up in hell, at least for a season.²⁷

At the end of the twentieth century there has been a noticeable intensification of the spiritual battle lines. The increase in satanic activity is ominously reminiscent of the days immediately surrounding our Lord’s Incarnation. Spiritism, occultism and outright Satanism are on the increase worldwide. A mortally wounded papacy may well be going through its death throes in the person of the present “moderate” pope. Islam gains proselytes in Christian nations, and holds the world to ransom for hostages and oil. The demon Drink, with all his cohorts, is exacting his toll from a morally decadent post-Christian society. Whether Lowman’s scheme is, after all, correct will become evident with the passing of this century!

Nothing of the extent geographically, nor of the duration of the Christian empire which Edwards envisages has been seen on the earth before. God’s people will “reign with Christ a thousand years” (Rev. 20). By this we must at least understand “a very long time.”²⁸ This day of peace and prosperity has not yet been accomplished for the church, as appears from Daniel 2 and 7, for it should “succeed the last of the few monarchies, even the Roman, in its last state.” Then, and only then, would the very last kingdom on earth be established—that of God’s own Son and heir! God’s holy people shall at last “inherit the earth.”²⁹

Edwards goes on to speak of the greatness of this latter-day, when “all flesh shall see His glory,” when His saints will happily “dwell and walk continually in it, and it should be

their constant daily light instead of the light of the sun." It will be a time of increase of knowledge and understanding, especially in divine things; of holiness, when "little children shall, in spiritual attainments be as though they were a hundred years old" (Isa. 65:20), when Christianity shall be uppermost in the world. This will be a time of union: peace, love and sweet harmony. Heresies will be "blown away" and joy will prevail for the marriage supper of the Lamb. Hence, contends Jonathan Edwards, it is a time "worth praying for."³⁰

In Romans 8:19-22, the whole creation groans and travails in pain, awaiting the manifestation of the sons of God. The forces of nature under man's dominion have been made subservient to sin. This confusion will not last; even the inanimate creation is pictured as reaching forward to this day, as do the intelligent elect because this is the proper business of all true saints, as do the saints and angels of heaven, those "who rejoice when one sinner repents."³¹

However, for his immediate purposes, Edwards seemed in the *Humble Attempt* to hint at a spiritual age quite apart from the millennium. His view of history allowed the gradual progression and dominance of the truth. "Though it is not for us to know the precise time of the fall of Antichrist, yet I humbly conceive that we have no reason to suppose it to be at so great a distance as Lowman places it." After all, the fall of Antichrist was to be but one of the events to precede the millennium.³²

There is a danger in any attempt to fix the "times and seasons" of God's providence. The fall of Antichrist has not yet happened. "The end is not yet."

Another matter of some concern in the unfolding of present events is the position of the land of Israel. For Edwards, this was to be the center of government in the millennium. This was to be the place "from whence the truth should shine forth."³³ It appears that Deuteronomy

11:24 has never been fully implemented. Never in any literal sense have the boundaries of Israel stretched quite so far. "This is an instance of the gradual fulfillment of the promises that God makes to His church."³⁴

Add to this that "nothing is more certainly told" in Romans 11 "than the national conversion of the Jews,"³⁵ and the location of Israel in her promised land becomes something of spiritual as well as historical significance. "With respect to the time since Christ," writes Edwards elsewhere, "their preservation as a distinct nation has been remarkable."³⁶

As to government in the millennium, Edwards says it may have very many different forms, "but none shall be tyrannical or contrary to the true liberty" (Dan. 2:44-45).³⁷ This is an ideal yet to be accomplished in the late twentieth-century world.

The relation of revival to the millennium is of some significance to Jonathan Edwards's scheme. John G. Lorimer, one hundred years later, spoke of the Word of God teeming "with assurances and prophecies of a day of coming universal religious revival."³⁸ In a revival, "when the Holy Spirit did set in," observed Edwards, "as much was done in a few days as at ordinary times in a year or two."³⁹ Put this on a grander scale, and "the visible kingdom of Satan shall be overthrown, and the kingdom of Christ set up on the ruins of it, everywhere throughout the whole habitable globe."⁴⁰

Edwards likens this to the Feast of Tabernacles. He presumes that the earth was created at the same time of year as when this Feast takes place: "So, in that glorious time God will create a new heaven and a new earth." This was also the time of year when the temple of Solomon was dedicated, God then descending in a pillar of cloud. "So at this happy time, the temple of God shall be gloriously built up in the world." Christ, he supposes, was born at that Feast. So "the woman clothed with the sun" will "bring forth her

son, to rule the nations" (Rev. 12), "at the commencement of that glorious day." Christ cried at the Feast of Tabernacles, "If any man thirst, let him come unto Me; out of his belly shall flow rivers of living waters," thus signifying, says Edwards, "the extraordinary measure of the Holy Spirit that shall be then given."⁴¹

Turning to Zechariah 14, Jonathan Edwards underlines the threat against those who do not come to the Feast, "i.e. that shall not acknowledge God's glorious works, praise His name, and rejoice with His people."⁴² This is a far fling from those Christians today who, taking Zechariah 14 all too literally, are attending the Jewish Feast as such, and are thus identifying with an apostate Judaism!

Another type of the millennium is the redemption of God's people from the Babylonian captivity, when the Feast of Tabernacles was kept in a way as never before since Joshua (Neh. 8:16ff.). The restoration "has the greatest resemblance of that great restoration of the church of God, of which the feast of tabernacles was the type." Those who oppose such work are open to the curse of God!⁴³

Meantime, the church continues in a state of tribulation as appears in Matthew 24. This relates not only to the taking and destroying of the city of Jerusalem by Titus, but a day of spiritual tribulation. "As the calamity brought on the Jewish nation by Rome continues all this time, so is the Christian church throughout this time kept in a state of tribulation and oppression." That "is not ended till the reign of Antichrist is ended." One may question whether the analogy holds in the light of modern history, but Edwards's point remains, that for the church the tribulation is the whole time preceding the millennium.⁴⁴

Jonathan Edwards's posthumously published *History of Redemption* sought to make an outline of redemptive history through the various dispensations of God's grace—past, present and future. This monumental work coincided with

the dawning of the *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation-history) school in Germany, Edwards being a contemporary of Bengel (1687-1752) who is generally acknowledged as the founder of that movement. We are concerned with the sections of that work which speak of the success of redemption from Edwards's own time until the general judgment.

Passing over the question as to how many vials are yet to be poured out, and with "nothing to guide us but the prophecies of Scripture," Edwards makes some general observations as to the state of things prior to the fall of Antichrist. This will be a dark time with respect to the interests of religion in the world, just as it was "a degenerate time among the Jews" prior to Christ's coming; as it was a "very dark time" prior to the Reformation. This is, says Edwards, what Christ spoke of His coming, to encourage His elect in Luke 18:8: "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?"—an exegesis which certainly seems to stand up within the context.⁴⁵

As to the method, Edwards stresses here as elsewhere the gradualness of the work of God, just as the children of Israel were brought gradually out of the Babylonian captivity, and the heathen Roman empire was destroyed "by a gradual, though a very swift, prevalency of the gospel." The figures of the mustard seed (Matt. 13:31ff.), the leaven (v. 33), the growth from the seed to the blade (Mark 4:26-28), and the vision of the waters in the sanctuary (Ezek. 4-7) are employed to prove this succession of events.⁴⁶

However, without a doubt, "the Spirit of God shall be gloriously poured out for the wonderful revival and propagation of religion," not by the authority of learned princes, not by the wisdom of learned men. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4:6). Here, Edwards says, "We know not where the pouring out of the Spirit shall begin."⁴⁷

In his *Thoughts on the Revival*, Edwards had hinted that

“there are many things that make it probable that this work will begin in America.” He cites Isaiah 60:9, “Surely the coastlands will wait for Me; and the ships of Tarshish will come first, to bring your sons from afar.” In an uncharacteristically strained form of logic he refers this to some more remote part of the world than Europe, and some more glorious work than that which first began in Jerusalem and then made its way to Europe via Asia. This prophecy, he insists, “seems plainly to point out America, as the first-fruits of that glorious day.” Doesn’t this account for the very discovery of this new world, “that God might in it begin a new world in a spiritual respect, when He creates the new heavens and the new earth.” The argument is crowned with an allusion to the “resurrection” of Hezekiah (Isa. 38:6), which was “given as an earnest of the church’s resurrection and salvation.” The symbol then employed was the sun returning ten degrees from west to east. Therefore it follows, according to Edwards, that the light of that day will dawn in the west, and most probably of all American Colonies, in New England!⁴⁸

This latter reasoning, argued Charles Chauncy (1705-87), was “absolutely precarious.”⁴⁹ Stein concludes that Edwards “seems to have been searching desperately for evidence to support the claim for the millennial role of New England’s revivals.”⁵⁰ In the context that may be so, for by the time of the *Humble Attempt*, just a few years later (1747), he entertained no such fanciful views of the role of North America. One dreads to think what the so-called Church of the Latter Day Saints makes of this parochial outburst!

“We know not where this pouring out of the Spirit shall begin,” said Edwards in the posthumously published work, almost as if he beckons to us from the grave to rescind his former statement, “or whether in many places at once.” “Or,” he adds, “whether what hath already taken place be not some forerunner and beginning of it.” Nevertheless,

this outpouring would bring multitudes to forsake vice and wickedness. The work of conversion would “break forth, and go on in such a manner as never has been hitherto” typified in the sounding of the silver trumpets in the beginning of their jubilee.⁵¹

However, the overthrow of Satan’s visible kingdom will not take place without a violent and mighty opposition. All hell will be greatly alarmed as multitudes flock to Christ in one nation and another. All the forces of the Beast, i.e., the Antichrist; the false prophet of Islam; and heathenism as represented by the Dragon will be united, leading up to “the battle of the great day of God Almighty.” For Satan dreads being cast out of the whole world!⁵² How many new sects have arisen since Edwards’s day?

In this battle, says Edwards, Christ and His church shall obtain a complete and entire victory over their enemies, “by His Word and Spirit.” The seventh trumpet shall sound, and the seventh vial shall be poured out, and Satan’s visible kingdom upon earth shall be destroyed. Heresies, infidelity and superstition will be abolished. The kingdoms of Antichrist and of Islam shall be overthrown. The veil that blinds the eyes of the Jews shall be withdrawn. Heathenism shall be destroyed and “all the ends of the earth” shall look to Christ and be saved (Isa. 45:22). The Devil shall be shut up in hell (Rev. 20:1-3). There will be a great spiritual resurrection of the church (Rev. 20:4) and judgments upon all of God’s enemies. Now the church shall forget her sorrow. “See what joyful praises are sung to God on this occasion by the universal church in heaven and earth, in the beginning of the nineteenth chapter of Revelation.”⁵³

This battle is represented as Armageddon. To Edwards, in commenting on Revelation 16:16, the battle of Megiddo was a “very lively type” of this victory of the saints over their enemies. The song of Deborah, after the victory at Megiddo, signifies the church’s great joy after this victory

at Armageddon spoken of in Revelation 19.⁵⁴

As to the millennium itself, in it the church shall find herself in a prosperous state mainly, but there will be a great apostasy towards the close of it. The church militant has become the church triumphant, and it is now a time of “heaven upon earth,” and a time of the fulfilling of those as yet unfulfilled prophecies of the Old Testament which speak of the glorious times of the Gospel in the latter days. It will be, says Edwards, a time of great light and knowledge (Zech. 14:6ff.), of the unraveling of the difficulties in the doctrines of religion, making the crooked straight, the rough plain and darkness light before God’s people. “It may be hoped that then many Negroes and Indians will be devines, and that excellent books will be published in Africa.”⁵⁶

David Smith, for six years a tutor at the Samuel Bill Theological College in Nigeria, says,

As we are delivered from a one-way street mentality in relation to mission, we will recognize that in future the churches of the Third World will play a major role—perhaps the major role—in evangelization. Jonathan Edwards’ amazing prophecy is even now being fulfilled before our eyes.⁵⁷

The millennium, according to Edwards, will be a time of great holiness in heart, life and practice (Zech. 14:20ff.), a time “wherein religion shall in every respect be uppermost in the world,” when kings shall employ all their power, glory and riches for the advancement of the glory and honor of Christ, and the good of His church (Isa. 49:23; 11:6-10, etc.). “Men, in their temper and disposition, shall then be like the Lamb of God, the lovely Jesus. . . . And then men will be abundant in expressing their love one to another, not only in words, but in deeds of charity” (Isa. 32:5). All the world will be united in one amiable society.⁵⁸

Edwards also speaks of the church being in “excellent order,” with “true government and discipline.”⁵⁹ To this the late Donald Macfarlane adds,

There shall then be only one denomination. . . and as there is but one church there is but one creed, and we believe that the creed shall be that which is contained in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, and we are sure that the church shall be presbyterian in her government, doctrine and discipline.⁶⁰

Jonathan Edwards wrote to John Erskine in 1750,

As to my subscribing to the substance of the *Westminster Confession*, there would be no difficulty; and as to the presbyterian government, I have long been perfectly out of conceit of our unsettled, independent, confused way of church government in this land; and the presbyterian way has ever appeared to me most agreeable to the word of God, and the reason and nature of things.⁶¹

The church shall then be, says Edwards, beautiful and glorious, “the greatest image of heaven itself” (Isa. 60:1). The general spiritual state will have a tendency to health and long life (Zech. 8:4). Temporal prosperity will be such that the days of Solomon will be seen to be “but an image” of these days.⁶²

Loraine Boettner observed a revolution in transportation, communication, home furnishings, etc., within our own lifetime.

But no matter how marvelous this material prosperity may become, it will ever remain but the by-product of the moral and spiritual prosperity that already to some extent characterizes the partially Christianized nations. It is abundant-

ly clear that these blessings do not originate under pagan religions. What marvels must lie ahead when nations the world over are Christian—when the millennium becomes a reality.⁶³

Towards the end of the millennium, which shall be of long continuance (a “thousand years” in Revelation 20:4, “many generations” in Isaiah 60:15), there will be a great apostasy. Satan has been sealed that he should deceive the nations no more; now he must be loosed out of his prison “for a little season” (Rev. 20:3). Now he will go forth to the four quarters of the earth to deceive the nations (vv. 7ff.). “This intimates,” says Edwards, “that the apostasy would be very general.” The enemies of Christ shall be vastly great, as the army of Gog and Magog is represented in Ezekiel: “an army large enough to reach from one side of the earth to the other.” From Luke 17:26 he argues that the world being so long in a state of great prosperity shall now begin to abuse their prosperity, to serve their lust and corruption.⁶⁴

A great opposition shall then be made against the church of God. She shall be compassed about and greatly threatened, but will not fall into the hands of the apostates as she had into the hands of Antichrist. The greater part of the world will have become visibly wicked, and open enemies to Christ. This will be a sin against light, Edwards reckons, which even those poor heathens who followed Antichrist, and those brought up in Islamic and popish darkness, were not guilty of! “This apostasy will be most like the apostasy of the devils,” for they turned enemies to Christ, though they enjoyed the light of heaven—these will have enjoyed the light and privileges of the glorious times of the church. Now they shall be in no expectation of the coming of Christ, and will laugh at the notion.⁶⁵

All this will call for the immediate coming of Christ, who shall come in the glory of His Father with all His holy

angels. “Then will come the time when all the elect shall be gathered in.”⁶⁶ This, observes Iain Murray, is the true hope of the church. The Puritans “held their hope in respect to Christ’s work in history with the anticipation of His coming when history ends.” This is the goal of all moral endeavor, held in tension in the New Testament by those like Peter and Paul who knew that death must come to them (John 21:18; 2 Tim. 4:6), who nevertheless were “looking for, and hasting unto the coming of the day of God.”⁶⁷

Did the apostles expect an early return of Christ? No, says Jonathan Edwards, for “Christ often speaks of His last coming as that which would be long delayed” (Matt. 25:5; Luke 20:9, 19; Matt. 24:48; Luke 17:22). He maintains also that when Christ speaks of His coming in Mark 13, Matthew 24, and Luke 21, He there means His coming in the extraordinary providences which attend the destruction of Jerusalem. The calling of the Gentiles follows the destruction of Jerusalem. The Jews would be led away captive into all nations, and Jerusalem would be trodden down of the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles should be fulfilled.⁶⁸

This is the first of four such “comings” setting up the kingdom of Christ. Hence Jesus could say “there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom” (Matt. 16:28). The second such event was the destruction of the heathen Roman Empire in Constantine’s time (Rev. 6, at the end). The third such representation of Christ’s coming in His kingdom is to be accomplished at the destruction of Antichrist (Dan. 7), “attended with a spiritual resurrection of the church, called the first resurrection in the twentieth chapter of Revelation.” The fourth is His coming to judgment.⁶⁹

Edwards says that at the day of judgment, the church is to be bestowed with glory. This is the salvation of the elect, when Christ appears the second time “without sin unto salvation” (Heb. 9:28). This is the “redemption of the pur-

chased possession" (Eph. 1:14), of those "sealed unto the day of redemption" (Eph. 4:30). God's grade is bestowed on the elect "to make them meet for glory." All that has passed before is but a foreshadowing of this great event.⁷⁰

The appearing of Christ will be unexpected by the wicked world, but for the saints it shall be a joyful and most glorious sight. The last trumpet shall sound, the dead shall be raised, the living changed. There will be the shout and the voice of the archangel (1 Thess. 4:16). All the people that ever lived shall appear on the earth at one time. "The bodies of the wicked who shall then be living shall be so changed as to fit them for eternal torment, and the bodies of all the living saints shall be changed to be like unto Christ's glorious body" (1 Cor. 15:51-53). The saints shall be relieved of the tendency to pain and suffering, and shall put on strength and beauty. "And in such glory shall the bodies of all risen saints appear," the bodies of the elect now being redeemed as well as their souls.⁷¹

On the day of the funeral of David Brainerd, using 2 Corinthians 5:8 as a text, Jonathan Edwards preached that

True saints, when absent from the body, are present with the Lord. They abide with the glorified human nature of Christ; in the immediate, full, and constant view of Him; being brought into a most perfect conformity to, and union with Him; enjoying a glorious and immediate intercourse and converse with Him; in a glorious fellowship with Him in His blessedness. True saints when absent from the body, are present with the Lord.⁷²

Thus, "when a saint dies, he has no cause at all to grieve." By virtue of his union with Christ he already possesses all things. "This is the kingdom Christ so often promised." The separate spirits of saints are in a very happy state before they are judged, and the wicked are very miserable. For the

saints, this is by way of anticipation of their reward. Meantime they are spectators of God's providences relating to His church here below.⁷³

There is a certain happiness of the saints in death, built upon a rock. "Death is rendered no death to them," says Edwards. Christ promises that those who believe in Him shall not die. The spiritual life of the Christian remains "unquenched by death," but is rather "translated into a more glorious life, and is turned into a kind of resurrection from the dead." There is a paradoxical contrast between the deadness of this life, and the perfection of life immediately after death. Death has lost its sting, and is used as a servant to the saints. The saint's soul is received by the angels at death, and ushered into the third heaven, there to remain in a state of glory and blessedness, in joyful expectation of greater things to come at the resurrection.⁷⁴

As to the soul of the wicked, it shall "be cast down into hell." Edwards, while not taking the parable of the rich man and Lazarus as necessarily historical, is nevertheless happy to cite it as indicative of the intermediate state. The wicked are "doubtless carried to a prison where devils and wicked men are reserved till the day of judgment." Here they shall suffer "extreme and amazing misery" until the resurrection. They shall be "in amazing fear of their more full punishment at the day of judgment." Then they shall rise to the resurrection of damnation, with neither mountains nor rocks to fall on them to hide them from the wrath of the Lamb.⁷⁵

On the judgment day the saints shall be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, while wicked men and devils shall be arraigned before the judgment seat. It seems that Christ "will not come quite to the ground, but His throne will be fixed in the airy region, whence He may be seen by all that vast multitude that shall be gathered before Him." The church shall be gathered together to Him and forever delivered from this present evil world. The devils in

hell “shall now stand in utmost amazement and horror before Christ and His church.” who shall appear to condemn them along with His other enemies. The church shall at last be vindicated!⁷⁶

Then sentence shall be passed on the righteous and the wicked. Christ and all His saints and holy angels shall leave this lower world, says Edwards, and ascend toward the highest heavens. This second ascension of Christ, he says, will be more glorious than the first! Then the world will be set on fire (2 Peter 3:7). This world, once the kingdom of Satan, becomes the place of his complete punishment. Christ’s enemies will be put under His feet. The church shall enter the highest heavens, and this shall be the marriage of the Lamb in the most perfect sense.⁷⁷

In his discourse on the final judgment, Edwards emphasizes the righteousness of Christ’s judgment. God the supreme ruler is also the supreme judge, but the person by whom He will judge the world is Jesus Christ, “God-Man.” Christ will give to every man his due “according to a most righteous rule.” Then, says Edwards, “the misery of the wicked and the happiness of the saints will be increased.”⁷⁸

Everyone must of necessity appear before the judgment seat. The judgment must be public, so the whole world appears before the judgment seat at one time. Since all generations are morally concerned with each other, all generations must appear together. “The end of the divine judgment,” says Edwards, “is the manifestation of the divine justice.” Then the wicked will be punished together, and the righteous rewarded together, eternally. The righteous will be transferred to an invisible world, away from this corruptible visible world. At the resurrection their souls will be united to their bodies, a “most rational state of perfection.”⁷⁹

One dubious aspect of Jonathan Edwards’s teaching on heaven and hell is the idea that the righteous will rejoice in

seeing the execution of God’s wrath upon the wicked. His discourse, *The End of the Wicked Contemplated by the Righteous*, is subtitled, “The torments of the wicked in hell no occasion of grief to the saints in heaven.” Based upon Revelation 18:20, where the saints are called to rejoice over the fall of Babylon, the discourse expands this call to apply to the destruction of all God’s enemies. This rejoicing, Edwards suggests, will arise out of a perfect holiness and conformity to Christ. They will see the justice of God, and the power and majesty of God. They will have no love or pity as such to the condemned.⁸⁰

While this sermon serves as a warning to ungodly men, it seems to be a wrong exegesis of the text. Surely God has “no pleasure in the death of the wicked” (Ezek. 33:11). If we are in conformity to God, then how can we rejoice over that which gives Him no pleasure? We may rejoice in the fact that the Judge of the earth shall do right, but to imagine pious ministers rejoicing over their unsaved adherents, or parents over children, or brothers over sisters is quite nauseating! Surely the righteous cannot rejoice over the damnation of anyone! Do we relinquish some of the happiness of heaven, then, if we cannot rejoice over these poor lost souls? “Is the real question not how God can be blessed while millions of His creatures are lost?” counters Donald MacLeod. We don’t know, but “He will do nothing that contradicts Himself.”⁸¹

Edwards meets an objection that “if we are apprehensive of the damnation of others now, it in no wise becomes us to rejoice at it.” The saints in glory, he says, will know concerning the damned in hell, that God never loved them. In hell men are no longer capable of salvation. The saints rejoice that God is glorified—about which we have no quibble! Natural affection, says Jonathan Edwards, “is no virtue to the saints in heaven.” Also, “the vengeance inflicted on many of the wicked will be a manifestation of God’s love to

the saints."⁸²

Elsewhere Edwards states emphatically that "the destruction of the unfruitful is of use, to give the saints a greater sense of their happiness." This is born out with an allusion to heaven ringing with the praises of "God's justice towards the wicked, and His grace towards the saints!"⁸³

There is no doubt that there is a justice on the part of God in the damnation of sinners. This is the punishment which the law condemns to, consistent with the sinfulness of sin, the amount of sin man is guilty of; and with the sovereignty of God who is under no obligation to keep man from sin, who was perfectly just in appointing the first father of mankind as the federal head and representative of the rest, and who has a right to determine fallen men's redemption as He pleases.⁸⁴

During a time of awakenings in Enfield, on July 8, 1741, Jonathan Edwards warned that there is no want of power in God to cast the wicked into hell "at any moment." Sinners deserve to be cast into hell. They are already under a sentence of condemnation to hell, and all their pains and contrivance to avoid it while still rejecting Christ are pointless. God is under no obligation to keep the natural man out of hell.⁸⁵

In fact, there is an unavoidability of this future punishment for the wicked. "Since God hath undertaken to deal with impenitent sinners, they shall neither shun the threatened misery, nor deliver themselves out of it." God will take satisfaction for His justice, and nothing they can do will enable them to avoid it. Neither will they be able to bear it.⁸⁶

This punishment will also be eternal. It will be "to the uttermost as to its duration." "When the wicked shall have filled up the measure of their sin, wrath will come upon them to the uttermost."⁸⁷ The word "everlasting," says Edwards, is used in the very sentence of the Judge at the last day. There is no repentance in hell, no further striving

of God's Spirit with man's spirit (Gen. 6:6). The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven (Matt. 12:31ff.). The word "eternal" is to be understood in the strictest sense. There is no salvation without Christ, no offer of mercy to those who have been made His footstool. God does not deal with the wicked as a friend. There is nothing temporary about their torments, nor any question of annihilation.⁸⁸

Stein cites a sermon on Revelation 19:2ff. (*Edwards Manuscripts*, The Yale Collection) in which the images of the Apocalypse are impressed upon the imagination of Edwards's congregation.

The smoke rising forever is a representation of the eternal torment and misery of those being punished for their sins. Eternal chastisement, he warned, is not inconsistent with the mercy of God, for the nature of the crime dictates the severity of the punishment.

Says Edwards, "Where the sun is grown so old that he grows pale and has lost his light, their torments will be as extreme as ever."⁸⁹

Edwards's earliest sermon on the Apocalypse dwelt rather with the "metaphorical description" of the "city of pure gold, like unto clear glass" of Revelation 21:18.⁹⁰ This "new heaven and new earth" (Rev. 21:1) is now seen to be quite different from the millennium. Here the saints reign, not for a thousand years, but "forever and ever" (Rev. 22:5).⁹¹

In heaven there shall be degrees of blessedness. This is not to "be a damp" to the happiness of some in heaven when they reflect on the greater happiness of others, for each will be full to the capacity God has given them. There will be a growth in holiness and happiness in eternity, argues Jonathan Edwards, because "their number of ideas

shall increase to eternity. Those in heaven shall abound with love one for another, rejoicing also in the love of Christ. A sweet concord of mind will express itself in music."⁹²

The happiness of heaven shall consist in perfections of health and strength. There shall be eternal discoveries of new beauties. Here the body and soul are united, the church is complete, the Mediator's work finished, God glorified. And even though the folly and vileness of their earthly behavior shall be seen for the sin that it is, yet the saints in heaven "shall perfectly see" how it has been turned to the glory of God!⁹³

After the resurrection, too, the saints' happiness shall consist in an external blessedness and delight. They shall have an intimate union and communion with Christ. Heaven will be "the place of God's eternal residence, and the place of the everlasting residence and reign of Christ, and His church." The saints will "enjoy God as their portion, and possess all things in the most excellent manner possible; in that they will have all in Christ their head."⁹⁴

To Jonathan Edwards, the greatest happiness of the saints in heaven consists in the "beatific vision." They shall see Christ, but they shall also see God (Matt. 5:8) with the eye of the soul. It will be a perfect sight of everything in God that excites, inflames and gratifies love.⁹⁵

So we come to the very last item on the eschatological agenda. On 1 Corinthians 15:28, Edwards observes that there is no further occasion for the government to be in the same manner in Christ's hands. He has obtained all the ends of His labor and death. At this point God the Father resumes the government which He had hitherto left entirely with Christ. "God will be respected as supreme orderer, and Christ with His church united to Him, and dependent on Him, shall together receive of the benefit of His government."⁹⁶

Thus we leave the eschatology of Jonathan Edwards, which has brought us through centuries and a millennium, the resurrection, the day of judgment and into the beatific vision itself. Time and eternity will show just how accurate his interpretation of this fascinating biblical doctrine was. It is unlikely that anyone will ever paint such a vivid and optimistic picture again. But this was from a man who died as he lived: The *Boston Gazette* of April 10, 1758, said, "As he lived cheerfully resigned to the will of heaven, so he died." In the place of departed spirits, surely Jonathan Edwards will know just how many of his speculations are true.

Endnotes

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Author

Mr. Christopher Holdsworth is a lay preacher who lives on the Isle of Skye. This article was originally a paper prepared for The Free Church College, Edinburgh, Scotland.