

David Brainerd



An artist's rendering of David Brainerd
preaching to the Indians.

“Sweetly Set on God”

The Piety of David Brainerd

introduced and edited by
Dustin W. Bengé



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"Sweetly Set on God"

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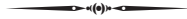
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Profiles in Reformed Spirituality



Charles Dickens's famous line in *A Tale of Two Cities*—"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times"—seems well suited to western evangelicalism since the 1960s. On the one hand, these decades have seen much for which to praise God and to rejoice. In His goodness and grace, for instance, Reformed truth is no longer a house under siege. Growing numbers identify themselves theologically with what we hold to be biblical truth, namely, Reformed theology and piety. And yet, as an increasing number of Reformed authors have noted, there are many sectors of the surrounding western evangelicalism that are characterized by great shallowness and a trivialization of the weighty things of God. So much of evangelical worship seems barren. And when it comes to spirituality, there is little evidence of the riches of our heritage as Reformed evangelicals.

As it was at the time of the Reformation, when the watchword was *ad fontes*—"back to the sources"—so it is now: The way forward is backward. We need to go back to the spiritual heritage of Reformed evangelicalism to find the pathway forward. We cannot live in the past; to attempt to do so would be antiquarianism. But our Reformed forebearers in the faith can teach us much about Christianity, its doctrines, its passions, and its fruit.

And they can serve as our role models. As R. C. Sproul has noted of such giants as Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards: “These men all were conquered, overwhelmed, and spiritually intoxicated by their vision of the holiness of God. Their minds and imaginations were captured by the majesty of God the Father. Each of them possessed a profound affection for the sweetness and excellence of Christ. There was in each of them a singular and unswerving loyalty to Christ that spoke of a citizenship in heaven that was always more precious to them than the applause of men.”¹

To be sure, we would not dream of placing these men and their writings alongside the Word of God. John Jewel (1522–1571), the Anglican apologist, once stated: “What say we of the fathers, Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, Cyprian?... They were learned men, and learned fathers; the instruments of the mercy of God, and vessels full of grace. We despise them not, we read them, we reverence them, and give thanks unto God for them. Yet...we may not make them the foundation and warrant of our conscience: we may not put our trust in them. Our trust is in the name of the Lord.”²

Seeking, then, both to honor the past and yet not idolize it, we are issuing these books in the series Profiles in Reformed Spirituality. The design is to introduce the spirituality and piety of the Reformed

1. R. C. Sproul, “An Invaluable Heritage,” *Tabletalk* 23, no. 10 (October 1999): 5–6.

2. Cited in Barrington R. White, “Why Bother with History?,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 4, no. 2 (July 1969): 85.

tradition by presenting descriptions of the lives of notable Christians with select passages from their works. This combination of biographical sketches and collected portions from primary sources gives a taste of the subjects' contributions to our spiritual heritage and some direction as to how the reader can find further edification through their works. It is the hope of the publishers that this series will provide riches for those areas where we are poor and light of day where we are stumbling in the deepening twilight.

—Joel R. Beeke
Michael A. G. Haykin

Foreword

Any retelling of the history of evangelicalism and those movements that preceded its emergence in the mid-eighteenth century (namely, European Pietism, British Puritanism, and the Reformation) must touch on certain iconic events and persons. How could one discuss the Reformation without Martin Luther, for instance, or Restoration Puritanism without John Owen? In a similar way, central to the story line of eighteenth-century American evangelicalism are the life and words of David Brainerd. Trying to tell the story of this period of the history of evangelicalism and the missionary impulse that emanated from it without any reference to Brainerd would overlook one of its central inspirational forces. Ever since Jonathan Edwards laid aside his important work of answering the challenge of Arminianism to craft a volume out of Brainerd's papers, which were left in his possession after Brainerd died in his home, his book on Brainerd has never been out of print. It has been a major inspiration to various believers across the centuries, from William Carey at the close of the eighteenth century to Jim Elliot in our own day.

It is a privilege then to recommend to a new generation of readers this small volume of choice

selections that focus on Brainerd's piety. Brainerd is probably best remembered for his missionary work. Yet Edwards's book on Brainerd also focused on the spirituality of this dear brother. Despite Brainerd's flaws, which Edwards knew well, the American theologian considered Brainerd a great spiritual model for his readers, for Brainerd was a man, in Edwards's words, "who had indeed sold all for Christ and had entirely devoted himself to God, and made his glory his highest end."¹ So, as Edwards prayed at the close of his funeral sermon for Brainerd:

Oh, that the things that were seen and heard in this extraordinary person, his holiness, heavenliness, labor and self-denial in life, his so remarkable devoting himself and his all, in heart and practice, to the glory of God...may excite in us all, both ministers and people, a due sense of the greatness of the work we have to do in the world, the excellency and amiableness of thorough religion in experience and practice, and the blessedness of the end of such whose death finishes such a life, and the infinite value of their eternal reward, when absent from the body and present with the Lord; and effectually stir us up to endeavors that in the way of such an holy life we may at last come to so blessed an end.²

—Michael A. G. Haykin

1. "A Sermon Preached on the Day of the Funeral of the Rev. Mr. David Brainerd," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Norman Pettit (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), 7:548.

2. "Sermon Preached," in *Works*, 7:553–54.

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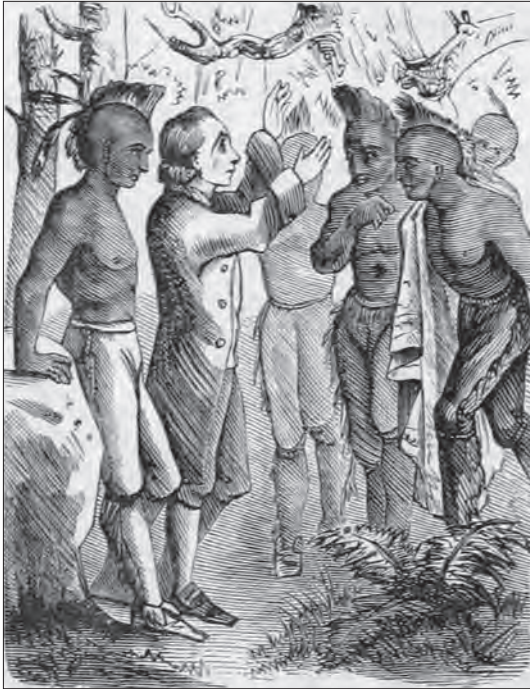
I owe a great thanks to my wife, Molli, who has been extremely patient with me while finishing this project. She always pushes me forward when I become weary of typing and staring at a computer screen. In addition, I am thankful to Dr. C. Rebecca Rine for editing and proofreading my biographical comments on Brainerd. The quality of this project would not be as it is without her sharp and discerning eye. A word of thanks should also be extended to my friend, David Brainard, for allowing me to use pictures of his personal first-edition copy of *An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd* by Jonathan Edwards.

I am extremely grateful for my PhD supervisor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Dr. Michael A. G. Haykin. This book is the result of his encouragement to explore the theme of spirituality during the marvelous period of the Great Awakening. A great thanks should also be extended to Dr. Steven J. Lawson, my mentor and friend, for allowing me the time to work on this manuscript apart from my duties at OnePassion Ministries. His love of church history and the stalwart Christian men and women of the past is infectious.

A great debt is owed to Jonathan Edwards and his desire to chronicle the amazing spiritual life of David Brainerd. Edwards has immortalized Brainerd as a preeminent Christian missionary and premier example of Christian piety. Finally, I am grateful to the Lord for the life, ministry, devotion, and personal holiness of David Brainerd. During dark seasons of my own Christian walk, his words have brought light for my journey. He unceasingly points me to the triune God for help in time of need. I look forward to meeting him one day when we will gather together at the feet of our Lord.

*My soul was this day, at turns, sweetly set on God.
I longed to be with Him that I might behold His
glory. I felt sweetly disposed to commit all to Him,
even my dearest friends, my dearest flock, my absent
brother, and all my concerns for time and eternity.
Oh that His kingdom might come in the world, that
they might all love and glorify Him for what He is
in Himself, and that the blessed Redeemer might
“see of the travail of his soul, and be satisfied”! “Oh
come, Lord Jesus, come quickly! Amen.”*

—David Brainerd (1718–1747)



A nineteenth-century illustration of David Brainerd ministering to the Indians.

The Piety of David Brainerd (1718–1747)



On a spring day in 1747, twenty-nine-year-old David Brainerd rode into the yard of a Northampton parsonage. It was the home of eminent New England pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) and his wife, Sarah (1710–1758). That Thursday, May 28, was a day not unlike many others. The Edwards family often received guests in the parsonage, which sometimes served as lodging for wanderers and visiting ministers. Edwards and Brainerd prior to this day were relative strangers to one another, having only met once before at the Yale commencement of 1743.¹ The summer of 1747 would nurture a growing friendship between the two men. The culmination of this friendship would produce one of the greatest missionary biographies in the history of American evangelicalism. It would also account for the preservation of the excerpts from Brainerd's diary included in this present volume, which provide a window into the soul of a man notable for his sincere and ardent spiritual life.

1. Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2008), 300.

The Life and Ministry of Brainerd

Born on Easter Sunday, April 20, 1718, Brainerd was one of nine children born to Hezekiah (1681–1727) and Dorothy (1679–1733) Brainerd. As in most New England families with Puritan lineage, their children would have been reared with strict emphasis placed on religious exercise and discipline.

Only two months after his conversion in the early part of September 1739, Brainerd entered Yale College in New Haven, Connecticut. He was soon labeled a “New Light”² when he demonstrated particular interest in a “religious fervor” that began sweeping through New England during his sophomore year. Brainerd was among the first of many who would be disciplined by college leadership for having expressed interest in the spreading religious enthusiasm, and in 1742 he was expelled from Yale both for remarking that tutor Chauncy Whittelsey had “no more grace than a chair” and for defying college rules. Brainerd’s expulsion from Yale fueled the fire of opposition ignited by the New Light leaders, who were adamant in their stand against the spiritually bankrupt institutions and religiously lack-luster ministers of the region.

Unable to complete his education at Yale, Brainerd sought other opportunities to fulfill his ministerial calling. After receiving his license to preach, he

2. “Old Lights” and “New Lights” generally referred to Congregationalists and Baptists in New England who took different positions on the Great Awakening from the traditional branches of their denominations. New Lights embraced the revivals that spread through the colonies, while Old Lights were suspicious of the revivals.



“Johnston’s View of Yale College,” an etching and engraving by John Greenwood, depicts the university sometime between 1742 and 1745, around the time that Brainerd attended.

was approved for missionary work on November 25, 1742, by the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge. From 1743 to 1747, he served as a Presbyterian missionary to the Mahican Tribe in Kaunameek, New York, and to Delaware Indians in Pennsylvania and New Jersey.³ During his brief stint as a missionary, Brainerd experienced the vigor and zeal of spiritual awakening among the Indians. This portion of his life has sometimes been forgotten because most historians of the era place Brainerd's contribution and significance only within the context of the Great Awakening. As a result, he has faded in historical significance and relevance and become a relatively unknown figure in the pantheon of American religious history. Yet his significance is demonstrated in part due to the many ways in which his life (as recorded in his diary) exemplifies the passions and piety of the Puritan ideal.

While staying in the Northampton parsonage, Brainerd shared his journals and diary with Edwards. Edwards recognized this rich material, full of religious zeal, as something that must be shared with a wider audience. Reluctantly, Brainerd began to organize his writings into a volume that would later be published. However, in 1747, the young missionary died from tuberculosis, a disease from which he had suffered for many years. The task of publishing the Brainerd diary fell to Edwards.

3. Joseph Conforti, “Jonathan Edwards's Most Popular Work: ‘The Life of David Brainerd’ and Nineteenth-Century Evangelical Culture,” *Church History* 54 (1985): 188–201.

In 1749, *An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd*⁴ was published. It was destined to become an evangelical classic. *The Life* became widely popular and would eventually surpass all Edwards's other polemical and theological works. As William Warren Sweet observed in *The Story of Religion in America*, "David Brainerd dead was a more potent influence for Indian missions and the missionary cause in general than was David Brainerd alive."⁵ The popularity of *The Life* grew to such an extreme, according to Joseph Conforti, that "by the nineteenth century David Brainerd had secured an exalted position in evangelical hagiography, and Edwards's *Life* had become an immensely influential devotional-inspirational work among evangelical clergy and laity." Conforti further suggests that both Brainerd himself and his biography need to be restored to their "central place in American religious history."⁶ The former rise of Brainerd's status as an "evangelical saint" perhaps fell prey to the temptation of failing to distinguish between the man and his imagined spiritual status within the American

4. The full title is *An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd, Minister of the Gospel, Missionary to the Indians, from the honourable Society in Scotland, for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, and Pastor of a Church of Christian Indians in New Jersey, Who died at Northampton in New England, Octob. 9th 1747 in the 30th Year of his Age: Chiefly taken from his own Diary, and other private Writings, written for his own Use; and now published, by Jonathan Edwards, A. M. Minister of the Gospel at Northampton* (Boston, 1749). In this work, I will refer to it as *The Life*.

5. William Warren Sweet, *The Story of Religion in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 236.

6. Conforti, "Jonathan Edwards's Most Popular Work," 190.



The banks of the Connecticut River at Haddam,
Connecticut, birthplace of David Brainerd.

Photo by Waywuwei, <https://goo.gl/2qR51f>

evangelical world. But just as extreme emulation can be a danger to those who exalt a man too highly, the failure to remember the lives of faithful men and women can also portend a failure to appreciate the work of God in the lives of individuals and the church at large. The selections to follow provide ample evidence that Brainerd's life is worthy of remembrance, tinged with the recognition that he is a saint only in the sense that all of God's people are saints, that is, as one sanctified by the Spirit.

Edwardsian Piety

Undergirding Brainerd and his ministry was an intense personal spiritual piety. What was the nature of Brainerd's piety? We can begin to answer this by turning both to his childhood upbringing and to the comments that Edwards would later make about him.

Brainerd was a descendant of a long line of men and women notable for their religious zeal and discipline. His father, Hezekiah, was quite influential in the community and would eventually become the leading member of the New England Brainerd family. According to Thomas Brainerd, a descendant of Hezekiah's brother James, Hezekiah was a man "of great personal dignity and self-restraint, of rigid notions of parental prerogative and authority, of the strictest puritanical views as to religious ordinances, of unbending integrity as a man and a public officer, and of extreme scrupulousness in his Christian

life.”⁷ Having been “early called by divine grace,” as another descendant wrote, he “gave himself up to the practice of religion” and “used to keep days of private fasting to promote his spiritual welfare.”⁸ In addition to the religious zeal of David’s father, his mother, Dorothy Hobart Mason, was a member of a family that had produced a number of ministers. Her maternal grandfather was the Puritan minister Samuel Whiting (1633–1713), who served congregations in Lincolnshire, England, and Lynn, Massachusetts.

Little is known about David’s upbringing among his eight siblings. After careful examination of his lineage, the type of environment in which he would have been reared may be deduced. As would have been usual in colonial eighteenth-century New England, an immense number of chores around the house and farm would have awaited the Brainerd children each morning. Careful attention to schooling and religious duties would have accompanied the arduous agrarian labor. The Brainerd children either were schooled at home or attended a local schoolhouse in the community. Whatever his educational tutelage, David rose quickly to the top of his class at Yale, signifying the great emphasis that was placed in the Brainerd household on rigorous training of the mind. Religious exercise and routine were central to the rearing of children in the eighteenth century. Puritan families often had both morning

7. Thomas Brainerd, *The Life of John Brainerd* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Publications Committee, 1865), 30.

8. Lucy Abigail Brainerd, *The Genealogy of the Brainerd-Brainard Family in America, 1649–1908* (Hartford, Conn.: Case, Lockwood, and Brainard Co., 1908), 2.7.42.

and evening prayers and devotions. David came of age in the same atmosphere of disciplined religious duty and church attendance that would later be the fertile seedbed for his future piety.

During his brief stint at Yale, Brainerd resided in the central cauldron of the Great Awakening. He first experienced the flames of revival under the ministry of George Whitefield (1714–1770) in 1740 and then again in March 1741, during a visit from Gilbert Tennent (1703–1764), a thirty-eight-year-old Presbyterian pastor from New Brunswick, New Jersey. Despite the controversy that would surround him at Yale concerning his support of the revival, Brainerd wrote of his spiritual maturity and growth during this period of the Awakening:

One day I remember in particular (I think it was in June, 1740) I walked to a considerable distance from the college, in the fields alone at noon, and in prayer found such unspeakable sweetness and delight in God, that I thought, if I must continue still in this evil world, I wanted always to be there, to behold God's glory: My soul dearly loved all mankind, and longed exceedingly that they should enjoy what I enjoyed. It seemed to be a little resemblance of heaven.⁹

Though tumultuous and somewhat devastating to him, Brainerd's brief time at Yale brought great spiritual encouragement to his life as he explored the

9. Jonathan Edwards, *The Life and Diary of David Brainerd*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), 2:320.



The revival ministries of George Whitefield (1714–1770) (*top*) and Gilbert Tennent (1703–1764) (*bottom*) influenced Brainerd during his time at Yale.

true effects of the Awakening in his own spiritual journey.

Among the many evaluations Edwards published on the Great Awakening, his most mature assessment and his greatest defense of genuine conversion was published under the title *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* in 1746.¹⁰ It can be argued that the eager publication of *The Life of David Brainerd* may be in part attributed to Edwards's desire to substantially illustrate the outworking of the distinguishing marks of a Christian as revealed in *Religious Affections* and other Great Awakening publications. In the life of Brainerd, Edwards found a living example that could substantiate the arguments for piety and spirituality he had promoted in his various works on the Great Awakening. The spirituality of Brainerd, as revealed in his personal diary and additional biographical account by Edwards, is a fitting model of true practical and authentic Edwardsian piety.

Such piety is committed to biblical theology as well as to its everyday practice in the lives of individuals. In *Religious Affections*, Edwards explains that without the agency of the Holy Spirit, there is no hope for true Christian conversion or behavior. He writes, "Christ living in the heart, the Holy Spirit dwelling there, in union with the faculties of the soul, as an internal vital principle, exerting his own proper nature.... If God dwells in the heart, and be vitally united to it, he will show that he is a God

10. Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), 1:234.

by the efficacy of his operation.”¹¹ For Edwards, right belief always brings about corresponding right action, facilitated by the Spirit’s power. In other words, Christian practices are a key component to Edwardsian spirituality.

We know from Edwards’s own words that he saw Brainerd as an example of the kind of piety he championed. Edwards began the author’s preface to *The Life* with this statement: “There are two ways of representing and recommending true religion and virtue to the world; the one, by doctrine and precept; the other, by instance and example.”¹² The latter is Edwards’s focus in his biographical account of Brainerd, and he traced Brainerd’s Christian piety along the following lines of thought: evangelical humiliation; a change of nature; sensitivity toward sin; and, finally, holiness of life. In each of these areas, Edwards sought to demonstrate, as he put it, how “Mr. Brainerd’s religious impressions, views, and affections in their nature were vastly different from enthusiasm.”¹³ Edwards desired to set Brainerd’s life and piety in juxtaposition to the fanaticism that had so quickly become associated with the Great Awakening. His comments on Brainerd’s life and diary, penned shortly after Brainerd’s untimely passing in late 1747, can give us further insight into the nature of Brainerd’s personal piety.

11. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, in *Works*, 1:316–17.

12. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:313.

13. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:314.

A
TREATISE
Concerning
Religious Affections,
In Three PARTS ;

PART I. Concerning the Nature of the *Affection*,
and their Importance in *Religion*.

PART II. Shewing what are *no certain Signs* that *religious Affections* are *gracious*, or that they are *not*.

PART III. Shewing what are *distinguishing Signs* of
truly *gracious* and *holy Affections*.

By *Jonathan Edwards, A.M.*
And Pastor of the *first Church* in *Norhampton*.

Levit. ix. ult. and x. 1, 2. *And there came a Fire out from before the Lord, --- upon the Altar ; --- which when all the People saw, they feared and fell on their Faces. And Nadab and Abihu --- offered strange Fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not : And there went out a Fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.*

Cant. ii. 12, 13. *The Flowers appear on the Earth, the Time of the Singing of Birds is come, and the Voice of the Turtle is heard in our Land ; the Fig-tree putteth forth her green Figs, and the Vines with the tender Grapes, give a good Smell. Ver. 15. Take us the Fawns, the little Fawns, which spoil the Vines ; for our Vines have tender Grapes.*

B O S T O N :
Printed for S. KNEELAND and T. GREEN in Queen-
street, over against the Prison. 1 7 4 6.

Title page from a 1746 edition of *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, by Jonathan Edwards, which outlines the distinguishing marks of a Christian. In Brainerd, Edwards found a living example of the piety and spirituality he promoted in *Religious Affections*.

Evangelical Humiliation

In *Religious Affections*, Edwards listed evangelical humiliation as the sixth sign of authentic affections. He presented humility as one of the two essential elements in self-denial. In the first element, the converted person resists his sinful and worldly inclinations and labors in the grace of God to renounce and avoid wicked activities.¹⁴ In the second element, the regenerate individual denies and resists the tendency of his heart toward self-examination, self-promotion, and praise.¹⁵ One who is truly converted does not boast in his self-sufficiency or ability to obtain grace, but, in the midst of the extraordinary effusions of divine grace, he humbles himself as a little child.

Again and again in *The Life*, Edwards demonstrated how Brainerd was a classic example of true evangelical humiliation. The true Christian, according to Edwards, is exceedingly aware of his own vileness and constantly aware of his unworthiness to continue in the love and grace of God. Edwards said, “Such is the nature of grace, and of true spiritual light, that they naturally dispose the saints in the present state, to look upon their grace and goodness little, and their deformity great.”¹⁶ Sam Storms reflects on this statement in *Signs of the Spirit*: “The truly humble soul is devastated by the smallest expression of depravity but nearly oblivious to

14. Sam Storms, *Signs of the Spirit: An Interpretation of Jonathan Edwards' Religious Affections* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2007), 109.

15. Storms, *Signs of the Spirit*, 109.

16. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, in *Works*, 1:297.

great progress in goodness and obedience.”¹⁷ During October 1743, Brainerd gave numerous accounts in his diary of distance from God, spiritual pride, corruption, and exceeding vileness. Edwards wrote, “He once says, his heart was so pressed with a sense of his pollution, that he could scarcely have the face and impudence (as it then appeared to him) to desire that God should not damn him for ever.”¹⁸ Brainerd described himself during this period as having “so little sense of God, or apprehension and relish of his glory and excellency”¹⁹ that it caused him to associate with and exhibit kindness toward those who had never been privileged to hear the gospel. Because of the wicked and vile state Brainerd saw himself in, he would often spend days alone in the forest in meditation and prayer. Other times would be spent in strict asceticism with respect to food and drink as he disciplined himself with respect to such necessities in the hope of hearing God and drawing closer to Him.

Brainerd viewed true evangelical humility as the supreme path on which a true Christian could obtain the knowledge of the glory and excellency of God. On February 1, 1746, he reflected on the testimony of a man he had just baptized. He labeled this man as a “conjurer and murderer.”²⁰ Yet he reported that this man seemed desirous to hear the preaching and teaching of Scripture and was resigned to wait on God according to His own personal terms or, as Brainerd put it, “his own way.” Brainerd

17. Storms, *Signs of the Spirit*, 111.

18. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:338.

19. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:338.

20. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:406.

wrote, “After he had continued in this frame of mind more than a week, while I was discoursing publicly he seemed to have a lively soul-refreshing view of the excellency of Christ, and the way of salvation by him, which melted him into tears.”²¹ It is this superior view of Christ in juxtaposition to man’s wickedness that brings about true holy affections to the soul and causes one to see the smallest degree of sin as truly abhorrent to the divine excellency of the infinite. Brainerd often preached on the subject of humiliation and the role it took in saving faith. On one occasion, he wrote in his diary on Thursday, June 18, 1747, “I discoursed repeatedly on the nature and necessity of that humiliation, self-emptiness, or full conviction of a person’s being utterly undone in himself, which is necessary in order to a saving faith.”²²

Edwards viewed evangelical humility as a supreme mark of the stirring of genuine religious affections within the heart of a Christian. He highlighted this repeatedly throughout the diary of Brainerd, setting forth Brainerd as a living example of what Edwards had concluded from Scripture was a chief sign of genuine conversion. He wrote of Brainerd, “His religious illuminations, affections, and comfort, seemed, to a great degree, to be attended with evangelical humiliation; consisting in a sense of his own utter insufficiency, despicableness, and odiousness; with an answerable disposition

21. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:414.

22. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:379.

and frame of heart.”²³ In the conclusion of *The Life*, Edwards described Brainerd’s continual awareness of his personal sin and how such sin constantly hindered the deep spirituality and “holy frame of mind”²⁴ that he so regularly sought. Brainerd seemed affected not only with his sinfulness before his conversion but also with his present wickedness. Edwards viewed this characteristic as the pinnacle of assurance of the inward residing of genuine religious affections. He concluded, “The desires of the saints, however earnest, are humble desires; their hope is an humble hope; and their joy, even when it is unspeakable and full of glory, is an humble, brokenhearted joy, leaving the Christian more poor in spirit, more like a little child, and more disposed to an universal lowliness of behaviour.”²⁵

A Change of Nature

One key in understanding true Edwardsian piety is the importance of God’s alteration of sinful human nature. This is the seventh sign of genuine affections, Edwards said. “Another way in which gracious affections are distinguished from those that are false is that they are attended with a change of nature.”²⁶ Edwards was very careful to demonstrate that the affections bring to pass an actual transformation in the nature of the soul. He connects this with Paul’s description in 2 Corinthians 3:18: “We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are

23. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:449.

24. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:449.

25. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, in *Works*, 1:302.

26. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, in *Works*, 1:302.

being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, even as by the Spirit of the Lord. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” Even false affections can alter how we think and feel, but only God can truly change the nature of the soul itself.

Edwards emphasized in *The Life* that, prior to his conversion, Brainerd sought on a number of occasions to gain assurance of salvation through certain ascetic practices. From Edwards’s perspective, none of these efforts could of themselves propel Brainerd toward conversion, though they may have been a sign of God’s working in Brainerd’s heart and ultimately drawing him to Himself.

Near the end of his life, Brainerd wrote several reflections on his childhood. One such reflection describes how at age seven or eight he came under significant conviction of sin. Accompanying this conviction of sin was also an extreme fear of dying. These heartfelt inclinations often led him to practice certain spiritual duties as he strove to gain assurance and peace within his heart and mind. However, these numerous endeavors to seek God in personal prayer and Bible reading often gave way to more worldly pursuits. This early pursuit of piety and Christian concern was short-lived and proved to be false.

Several other events in Brainerd’s family life led him to experience severe bouts of depression and melancholy. A month before his fourteenth birthday, his mother, Dorothy, died at only fifty-two years of

age, leaving young David “exceedingly distressed.”²⁷ The sadness he felt caused him to quickly dismiss thoughts of spiritual advance as he fell into a state of relative complacency. The next year, Brainerd moved into the home of his sister Jerusha and her new husband, Samuel Spencer, in the village of East Haddam.²⁸ During his four years in residence there, Brainerd ardently pursued private spiritual duties and also disciplined himself to avoid too much time spent in the company of fellow young people due to the adverse effect it could have on his spiritual life. During this period, Brainerd was experiencing what Edward defined in *Religious Affections* as “conceited and ostentatious humility”²⁹ that gives way to no spiritual advance or change of nature.

The stirring of real conversion began when Brainerd read the work by Solomon Stoddard (1643–1729) *A Guide to Christ; or, The Way of Directing Souls That Are under the Work of Conversion*.³⁰ He identified this single volume as the instrument “which, I trust, in the hand of God was the happy means of my conversion.”³¹ In 1739, Brainerd wrote of experiencing an overwhelming inner vision of God’s surpassing glory:

Having been thus endeavouring to pray though, as I thought, very stupid and senseless for near half an hour, then, as I was walking in a dark thick grove, unspeakable glory seemed to open

27. Vance Christie, *David Brainerd: A Flame for God* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2009), 17.

28. Christie, *David Brainerd*, 17.

29. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, in *Works*, 1:296.

30. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:318.

31. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:318.

to the view and apprehension of my soul. I do not mean any external brightness, for I saw no such thing; nor do I intend any imagination of a body of light, somewhere in the third heavens, or any thing of that nature; but it was a new inward apprehension or view that I had of God, such as I never had before, nor any thing which had the least resemblance of it. I stood still, wondered, and admired! I knew that I never had seen before any thing comparable to it for excellency and beauty; it was widely different from all the conceptions that ever I had of God, or things divine. I had no particular apprehension of any one person in the Trinity, either the Father, the Son, or the Holy Ghost; but it appeared to be divine glory. My soul rejoiced with joy unspeakable, to see such a God, such a glorious Divine Being; and I was inwardly pleased and satisfied that he should be God over all for ever and ever. My soul was so captivated and delighted with the excellency, loveliness, greatness, and other perfections of God, that I was even swallowed up in him; at least to that degree, that I had no thought (as I remember) at first about my own salvation, and scarce reflected there was such a creature as myself.³²

His conversion left him with a willing acceptance of God's glory and sovereignty, fresh appreciation for the beauty and salvation of Christ, and a deep inner desire to serve Him in the fullest capacity. Edwards wrote the following of Brainerd's conversion:

32. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:319.

The change wrought in him at his conversion, was agreeable to scripture representations of that change which is wrought in true conversion; a great change, and an abiding change, rendering him a new man, a new creature: not only a change as to hope and comfort, and an apprehension of his own good estate; and a transient change, consisting in high flights of passing affection; but a change of nature, a change of the abiding habit and temper of his mind.³³

From his conversion to the end of his life, Brainerd experienced the dichotomy of living with the constant fluctuation between overwhelming joy and spiritual darkness.

Brainerd understood regeneration as an instantaneous act by the Holy Spirit on the soul of the unconverted. On the Lord's Day, August 11, 1745, he delivered a sermon from Luke 15 on the prodigal son. He wrote, "Observed no such remarkable effect of the Word upon the assembly as in days past."³⁴ However, things changed quite dramatically that afternoon when he expounded the apostle Peter's Pentecost sermon before a mixed crowd of Indians and white people. He remembered:

At the close of my discourse to the Indians, made an address to the white people, and divine truths seemed then to be attended with power both to English and Indians. Several of the white heathen were awakened, and could

33. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:447.

34. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:393.

not longer be idle spectators, but found they had souls to save or lose as well as the Indians; and a great concern spread through the whole assembly. So that this also appeared to be a day of God’s power, especially towards the conclusion of it, although the influence attending the word seemed scarce so powerful now as in some days past.³⁵

He reported that the Indians who had received spiritual relief and comfort now appeared “humble and devout” and conducted themselves in “an agreeable and Christian manner.”³⁶ Brainerd recorded numerous instances where the Indians were convicted of certain sins and that, because of this change in nature, they immediately sought to correct the error of their ways. He spoke of an Indian woman who came to him in a greatly saddened state because the night before she had been angry with her child. Prior to coming for Brainerd’s advice and counsel, she had been weeping for several hours because of the sin that had manifested itself in her heart. Such occurrences were common among Brainerd’s missionary endeavors. A divine change of nature brought about tremendous responses to his preaching, giving evidence through genuine affections among those converted under his ministry. According to Edwards, when these affections are from God, they “leave a sweet savour and relish of divine things

35. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:393.

36. Christie, *David Brainerd*, 175.

on the heart, and a stronger bent of the soul towards God and holiness.”³⁷

Sensitivity toward Sin

On the Lord’s Day, May 17, 1747, Brainerd recorded in his diary, “Innumerable evils compassed me about; my want of spirituality and holy living, my neglect of God, and living to myself—all the abominations of my heart and life seemed to be open to my view; and I had nothing to say but ‘God be merciful to me a sinner.’”³⁸ In his diary, Brainerd employed statements such as “vilest acts of sin,”³⁹ “open scandal,”⁴⁰ “sin and corruption within me,”⁴¹ and, “Oh, the day of deliverance from all sin!”⁴² Brainerd’s sensitivity toward his personal sin was an essential element of his piety.

Edwards emphasized this aspect of Brainerd’s spirituality, arguing for the same type throughout his own treatises. In *Religious Affections*, Edwards noted the ninth sign of authentic affections—a tenderness of spirit and sensitivity toward sin. Only genuine affections soften the heart to sin. Adversely, false affections, no matter how powerful, eventually only harden the heart to sin. Edwards said that the grace of conversion does not “stupify a man’s conscience; but makes it more sensible, more easily and thoroughly to discern the sinfulness of that which

37. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, in *Works*, 1:303.

38. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:377.

39. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:377.

40. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:377.

41. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:377.

42. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:382.

is sinful, and to receive a greater conviction of the heinous and dreadful nature of sin.”⁴³ For Edwards, the heart of a believer is like that of a young child whose heart melts when affected with grief. Genuine Edwardsian piety is defined as having a sense of one’s own sin that, in effect, produces a tenderness of spirit. Brainerd exemplified these qualities throughout his diary, as he no doubt did in his life.

Brainerd viewed sin as the great enemy and one that must be avoided at all costs. He spent his life in the pursuit of freedom from heinous vice. After his expulsion from Yale, he went to live with Jediah Mills of Ripton. It was there that he began the third book of his diary. On April 10, 1742, he recorded:

Spent much time in secret prayer this morning, and not without some comfort in divine things; and, I hope, had some faith in exercise: but am so low, and feel so little of the sensible presence of God, that I hardly know what to call faith, and am made to possess the sins of my youth, and the dreadful sin of my nature. I am all sin; I cannot think, nor act, but every motion is sin. I feel some faint hopes, that God will, of his infinite mercy, return again with showers of converting grace to poor gospel-abusing sinners; and my hopes of being employed in the cause of God, which of late have been almost extinct, seem now a little revived. O that all my late distresses and awful apprehensions might prove but Christ’s school, to make me fit for

43. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, in *Works*, 1:309.

greater service, by teaching me the great lesson of humility!⁴⁴

Wednesday, April 28, he wrote, “I felt that all my unhappiness arose from my being a sinner; for with resignation I could bid welcome all other trials; but sin hung heavy upon me: so that I went to bed with a heavy heart because I was a sinner; though I did not in the least doubt God’s love.”⁴⁵ On another occasion in 1744 he wrote, “I find that I can’t be thus entirely devoted to God: I can’t live and not sin.”⁴⁶ All of his self-confidence was gone, and he gave way to utter reliance on God. His sin, identified throughout his diary, seems to overtake and overwhelm him to the point of utter despair. However, in the ruminations of his own depravity, there seems to shine forth a glimmer of radiant light and hope.

A propensity toward depression became a serious problem in Brainerd’s life. It is spiritually healthy to have a sensitivity toward sin, but it is not healthy to allow that sensitivity to give way to despair. In *The Life*, Edwards was careful in dealing with this subject and provided only glimpses of Brainerd’s bouts with melancholy. Brainerd often wrote of feeling gloom, darkness, despair, confusion of mind, and his inability to experience the sweetness of God or Christ. There are countless reasons why Brainerd would be prone to such despondency. Writing more than one hundred years after Brainerd’s death, a descendant noted, “It must, however, be confessed that in the

44. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:322.

45. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:324.

46. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:343.

whole Brainerd family for two hundred years there has been a tendency to a morbid depression, akin to hypochondria.”⁴⁷ Brainerd endured continual difficult struggles throughout his life and ministry that often contributed to his sense of depression. However, this propensity does not necessarily indicate a spiritual deficiency on his part.⁴⁸ As a brief review of Christian history will reveal, such eminent Christians as Martin Luther, John Calvin, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, and many others often struggled with despondency. The means Brainerd employed in getting through these valleys were fervent prayer and tender sensitivity to the presence of the Spirit in his life.

Holiness of Life

On October 20, 1740, Brainerd recorded in his diary, “I again found the sweet assistance of the divine Spirit in secret duties both morning and evening and life and comfort in religion through the whole day.”⁴⁹ The themes of spiritual growth and holiness of life are replete throughout Brainerd’s diary and are the subject of Edwards’s twelfth and most important sign of true genuine affection. Edwards wrote, “Gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice,”⁵⁰ or, holiness of life. Edwards described the Christian pilgrimage as

47. Thomas Brainerd, *Life of John Brainerd* (Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger Publishing, 2007), 168. Thomas was a descendant of David and John Brainerd’s uncle, James.

48. Christie, *David Brainerd*, 316.

49. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:320.

50. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, in *Works*, 1:314.

one of outworking, in practice, the life that has been given to us by God. In other words, if God resides in the heart and is vitally united to it, then “he will show that he is a God, by the efficacy of his operation. For in the heart where Christ savingly is, there he lives, and exerts himself after the power of that endless life that he received at his resurrection.”⁵¹ God, as the supplier and animator of strength within the regenerate person, produces genuine spiritual fruit through holiness of life and practice.

In *The Life*, Edwards told his readers, “I am persuaded every pious and judicious reader will acknowledge, that what is here set before him is indeed a remarkable instance of true and eminent Christian piety in heart and practice.”⁵² Edwards set forth Brainerd for the reader as a Christian example to emulate for growth in piety. On May 17, 1744, Brainerd wrote, “Vital piety and holiness appeared sweet to me, and I longed for the perfection of it.”⁵³ Piety and holiness did not appear to Brainerd as something morbid but as something sweet and necessary to pursue.

Earlier the same year, on Friday, January 6, Brainerd observed a strict day of fasting and prayer, eating and drinking nothing for twenty-four hours for the purpose of reconsecrating himself to the Lord.⁵⁴ He often employed these kinds of spiritual duties and disciplines in his pursuit of holiness. In the entry for Monday, August 1, 1743, he wrote, “Oh,

51. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, in *Works*, 1:317.

52. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:315.

53. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:346.

54. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:341–42.

that I might always follow after holiness, that I may be fully conformed to God!”⁵⁵

In his spiritual journey, Brainerd sought God Himself solely for the excellence of who He is and not “whatever good uses or ends the knowledge of God might bring to them.”⁵⁶ On April 30, 1743, from Kaunaumeeck, New York, Brainerd wrote to his brother John who was then a student at Yale College in New Haven. He wrote: “I should tell you, ‘I long to see you,’ but that my own experience has taught me, there is no happiness, and plenary satisfaction to be enjoyed, in earthly friends, though ever so near and dear, or in any enjoyment, that is not God himself.”⁵⁷ According to Edwards, the unregenerate will automatically abandon any pursuit of godliness when it begins to rob them of comfort and earthly pleasure, whereas the godly will cast off comfort and interest in the pursuit of something far more grand, namely, God Himself. Brainerd loved God for God’s own sake and was propelled by the beauty and excellence of His divine nature. By the example of his life, Brainerd affirmed that no degree of trial or loss would impede him in his journey toward heaven.

Conclusion

Edwards employed the same theological themes in *The Life* that he so carefully wove together in *Religious Affections*. Writing to his brother John, Brainerd advised, “Read Mr. Edwards on the Affections,

55. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:336.

56. Storms, *Signs of the Spirit*, 142.

57. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:435.

where the essence and soul of religion is clearly distinguished from false affections.”⁵⁸ Edwards knew that he could write multiple theological treatises and discourses on the life of a Christian, but none would serve to demonstrate what he desired to explain like that of a real life. Within the life, ministry, and example of Brainerd, Edwards found such a life.

The final entry in Brainerd’s diary was made on Friday, October 2, 1747:

My soul was this day, at turns, sweetly set on God: I longed to be with him, that I might behold his glory. I felt sweetly disposed to commit all to him, even my dearest friends, my dearest flock, my absent brother, and all my concerns for time and eternity. Oh that his kingdom might come in the world; that they might all love and glorify him, for what he is in himself; and that the blessed Redeemer might “see of the travail of his soul, and be satisfied!” “Oh come, Lord Jesus, come quickly! Amen.”⁵⁹

Even in the final days of his life, Brainerd delighted in the comforting words of Scripture, the beauty he enjoyed of God, and the joys he continually experienced in Christ. On Friday morning, October 9, 1747, he died. Edwards, at Brainerd’s bedside, described the moment as “when his soul, as we may well conclude, was received by his dear Lord and Master, as an eminently faithful servant, into that state of perfection of holiness and fruition of God which he had so often and so ardently longed

58. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:439.

59. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:385.



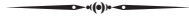
An illustration of David Brainerd's tomb
in Northampton, Massachusetts.

for; and was welcomed by the glorious assembly in the upper world, as one peculiarly fitted to join them in their blessed employments and enjoyments.”⁶⁰

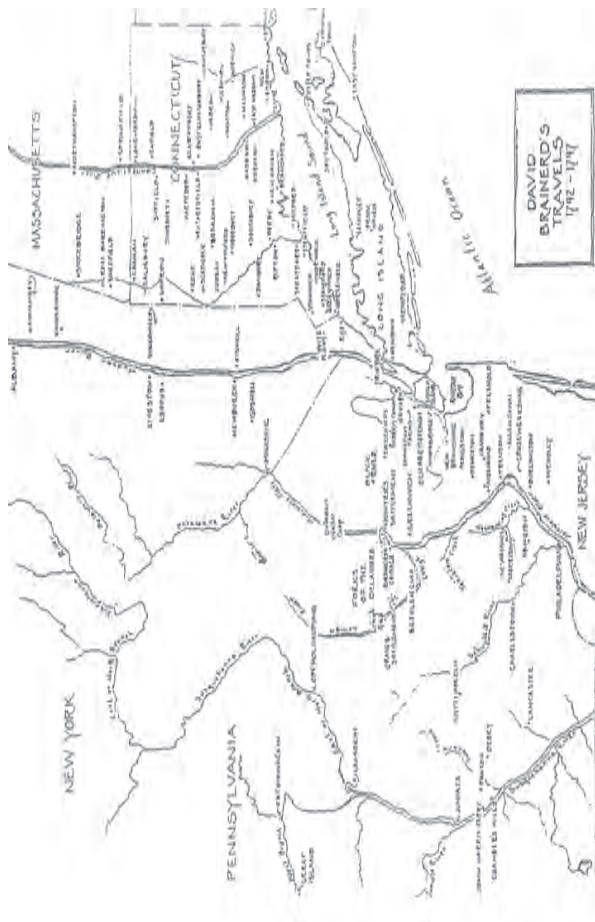
It is possible that Edwards never imagined that the Christian experience he had written about for so many years would be embodied in a single man. In the days ahead, as Edwards read through the vast chronicle penned by this young man, he knew this material must be shared with the world at large. *The Life* would be the most popular and widely circulated of all Edwards’s works, extending to new generations not only an Edwardsian piety but a truly biblical one.

60. Edwards, *The Life*, in *Works*, 2:386.

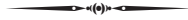
SECTION ONE



Hungering and Thirsting
after Righteousness



From *David Brainerd: Pioneer Missionary to the American Indians*, by John Thornbury, courtesy of Evangelical Publishers.



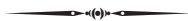
Seeking Assurance

Sometime in the beginning of winter 1738, it pleased God on one Sabbath Day morning as I was walking out for some secret duties to give me on a sudden such a sense of my danger and the wrath of God that I stood amazed, and my former good frames that I had pleased myself with all presently vanished. From the view I had of my sin and vileness, I was much distressed all that day, fearing the vengeance of God would soon overtake me. I was much dejected, kept much alone, and sometimes envied the birds and beasts their happiness because they were not exposed to eternal misery, as I evidently saw I was. And thus I lived from day to day, being frequently in great distress. Sometimes there appeared mountains before me to obstruct my hopes of mercy. And the work of conversion appeared so great that I thought I should never be the subject of it. I used, however, to pray and cry to God and perform other duties with great earnestness and thus hoped by some means to make the case better. And though hundreds of times I renounced all pretenses of any worth in my duties, as I thought, even while performing them, and often confessed to God that I deserved nothing for the very best of them but eternal condemnation, yet still I had a secret hope of recommending myself to God

by my religious duties. When I prayed affectionately and my heart seemed in some measure to melt, I hoped God would be by this moved to pity me. My prayers then looked with some appearance of goodness in them, and I seemed to mourn for sin. And then I could in some measure venture on the mercy of God in Christ, as I thought, though the preponderating thought, the foundation of my hope, was some imagination of goodness in my heart-meltings, flowing of affections in duty, extraordinary enlargements, etc. Though at times the gate appeared so very straight that it looked next to impossible to enter, yet, at other times, I flattered myself that it was not so very difficult and hoped I should by diligence and watchfulness soon gain the point. Sometimes after enlargement in duty and considerable affection, I hoped I had made a good step toward heaven and imagined that God was affected as I was, and that He would hear such sincere cries, as I called them. And so sometimes, when I withdrew for secret duties in great distress, I returned comfortable¹ and thus healed myself with my duties.² (317)

1. *Comfortable*: comforted.

2. The excerpts from Brainerd's journal in this section have been taken from Jonathan Edwards, *The Life and Diary of David Brainerd*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997). Page numbers are indicated at the end of each excerpt.



The Insufficiency of All Duties

Sometime in February 1739, I set apart a day for secret fasting and prayer and spent the day in almost incessant cries to God for mercy that He would open my eyes to see the evil of sin and the way of life by Jesus Christ. And God was pleased that day to make considerable discoveries of my heart to me. But still I trusted in all the duties I performed, though there was no manner of goodness in them, there being in them no respect to the glory of God nor any such principle in my heart. Yet God was pleased to make my endeavors that day a means to show me my helplessness in some measure.

Sometimes I was greatly encouraged and imagined that God loved me and was pleased with me and thought I should soon be fully reconciled to God. But the whole was founded on mere presumption, arising from enlargement in duty or flowing of affections or some good resolutions and the like. And when, at times, great distress began to arise on a sight of my vileness, nakedness, and inability to deliver myself from a sovereign God, I used to put off the discovery, as what I could not bear. Once, I remember, a terrible pang of distress seized me, and the thoughts of renouncing myself and standing naked before God, stripped of all goodness, were so dreadful to me that

I was ready to say to them as Felix to Paul, “Go thy way for this time.” Thus, though I daily longed for greater conviction of sin, supposing that I must see more of my dreadful state in order to a remedy, yet when the discoveries of my vile, hellish heart were made to me, the sight was so dreadful and showed me so plainly my exposedness to damnation that I could not endure it. (317)



A New Inward Apprehension

Walking again in the same solitary place where I was brought to see myself lost and helpless, as before mentioned. Here, in a mournful melancholy state, I was attempting to pray but found no heart to engage in that or any other duty. My former concern, exercise, and religious affections were now gone. I thought the Spirit of God had quite left me but still was not distressed, yet disconsolate, as if there was nothing in heaven or earth could make me happy. Having been thus endeavoring to pray, though, as I thought, very stupid and senseless for nearly half an hour, then, as I was walking in a dark, thick grove, unspeakable glory seemed to open to the view and apprehension of my soul. I do not mean any external brightness, for I saw no such thing. Nor do I intend any imagination of a body of light somewhere in the third heavens or anything of that nature. But it was a new inward apprehension or view that I had of God, such as I never had before, nor anything which had the least resemblance of it. I stood still, wondered, and admired! I knew that I never had seen before anything comparable to it for excellence and beauty. It was widely different from all the conceptions that ever I had of God or things divine. I had no particular apprehension of any one person in the Trinity,

either the Father, the Son, or the Holy Ghost; but it appeared to be divine glory. My soul rejoiced with joy unspeakable to see such a God, such a glorious divine being. And I was inwardly pleased and satisfied that He should be God over all forever and ever. My soul was so captivated and delighted with the excellence, loveliness, greatness, and other perfections of God that I was even swallowed up in Him, at least to that degree that I had no thought (as I remember) at first about my own salvation and scarce reflected there was such a creature as myself. (319)