

Jonathan Edwards

1703 – 1758

Born	East Windsor, Connecticut
Education	Yale College (entered age 13, graduated valedictorian)
Occupation	Puritan minister, theologian, college president
Key Sermon	Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God (1741)
Legacy	Greatest theologian in American history; spark of the First Great Awakening

“There is nothing that keeps wicked men out of hell but the mere pleasure of God.”

— Jonathan Edwards, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, 1741

The Man

Jonathan Edwards is widely regarded as the greatest theologian America has ever produced. Born in Connecticut to a minister father, he entered Yale at age thirteen and graduated at the top of his class. His mind was extraordinary — he wrote philosophical essays of lasting significance while still a teenager — but his intellect was always in service of his faith, never a substitute for it.

He served for over two decades as pastor of the church in Northampton, Massachusetts, where his preaching became the spark of the First Great Awakening — the great spiritual revival that swept the colonies in the 1730s and 1740s. The Awakening was not merely a religious event. It forged a common American identity across thirteen fragmented colonies, giving them a shared spiritual experience that would later make political unity possible.

The Sermon

Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, preached at Enfield, Connecticut on July 8, 1741, is the most famous sermon in American history. Edwards did not preach it with fire and thunder. He was a scholar — he read it quietly from his notes in a measured voice. The power was entirely in the doctrine.

When he preached it, people reportedly wept, cried out, and clung to the church pews as if the floor were giving way. The building was said to be filled with the sound of mourning. Edwards had to pause repeatedly and ask for quiet before continuing.

His core argument was not cruelty — it was precision. Nothing separates a sinner from hell except the merciful will of God. Not morality, not church attendance, not good intentions. Only God's restraint holds back judgment. This was not a threat; it was a warning issued because an open door still existed.

The Legacy

Later in life Edwards became president of Princeton University, but died just weeks after taking office — from a smallpox inoculation gone wrong. He was 54.

He left behind a body of theological work that has never been surpassed in American letters. His treatises on the freedom of the will, the nature of true virtue, and religious affections remain standard reading in serious theological education. He proved that rigorous scholarship and deep personal faith are not enemies. They were made for each other.

His influence on American Christianity — and through it on American culture and the founding generation — is almost impossible to overstate. The Awakening he helped spark broke down denominational barriers, created a sense of shared identity, and prepared a generation of colonists to think in terms of covenant, responsibility, and liberty under God.

Why This Matters for Bible X

Day 2 gives the diagnosis. Winthrop issued the charge, but a charge without an honest reckoning with sin has no foundation. Edwards forces the question every man must eventually answer honestly: What am I before God — not compared to my neighbors, but compared to His standard?

The sermon is not intended to produce despair. It is intended to produce honesty. And honesty is where every genuine change begins.