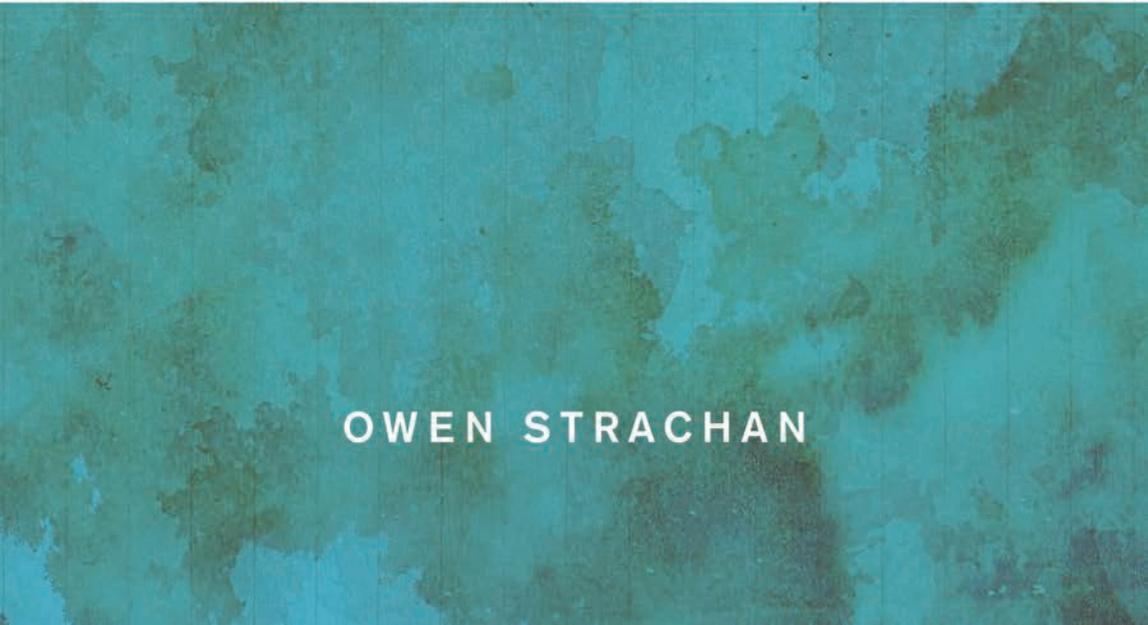




always in
God's hands

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DAY BY DAY IN THE COMPANY OF
Jonathan Edwards



OWEN STRACHAN

Praise for Always in God's Hands

I gladly commend this tremendous collection of devotions. A bit of Scripture, a bit of Edwards, and a bit of meditation—a powerful combination.

TIM CHALLIES

Author and blogger at challies.com

Jonathan Edwards held an unshakable faith in the sovereignty and active providence of God. The center of this faith was absolute confidence in the goodness of God and His loving relationships with His creation—especially His human creatures. Edwards was a man of unparalleled devotion and an unrivaled mind. The passage of three centuries has not dimmed his words or diminished his monumental contribution to Christian thought. This new devotional by Owen Strachan is a welcome introduction to Edwards's piety and theological insights. Strachan gives us the best of Edwards's theologically rich, warmhearted worship of the Savior he loved.

R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.

President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

I must confess, I really like daily devotional books. Luther, Lloyd-Jones, the Puritans, the church fathers, and, of course, Spurgeon, among others, are constant companions of mine in this format. Now I have another one to add. Dr. Owen Strachan, a noted Jonathan Edwards scholar, has put together a wonderful collection of quoted material penned by Edwards, with accompanying reflections and Scripture, for every day of the year. This is an excellent way to be introduced to and benefit from Jonathan Edwards if you've never really read him. (Your high school or college American Lit course reading of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" doesn't count.) Even if you've read a lot of Edwards's works, you'll enjoy approaching them devotionally here. *Always in God's Hands* will give you beautifully and powerfully stated biblical truth from the writings of Edwards—providing you with plenty to think about profitably and to pray over personally.

LIGON DUNCAN

Chancellor and CEO of Reformed Theological Seminary

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God's hands



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To Jason Allen

*“They will be grateful that,
at the threatened nightfall,
the blood of their fathers ran strong.”*

WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR.

Introduction

JONATHAN EDWARDS IS WELL-KNOWN—in many cases *exclusively* so—for his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” read in many high school English classes. There, students learn to fear Edwards, and to look askance at his God.

Edwards did not shy away from preaching the whole counsel of God, and neither should any pastor. He knew that God’s justice and mercy do not clash, but together drive the needy sinner to repentance and faith. Only by seeing the depths of our sin will we hunger to taste the great grace offered us through Christ’s death and resurrection. But having noted his sound commitment to preaching the whole Bible, we can see that Edwards also preached a great deal on heaven. Moving beyond the caricatures, this book seeks to recapture the true Jonathan Edwards. He was a faithful pastor who believed that humankind was not made for small pleasures, but Godward ones. Today, as ever, we need to recover this vision for our daily lives.

The title *Always in God’s Hands* emerges from some of the letters Edwards wrote. For example, writing to his daughter Esther in 1753, Edwards reminded her that he could not perfectly guide her and guard her, but God would. This comforting perspective, coming from a doting father to his beloved child, goes to the very heart of the Christian faith. It is a fearsome thing to fall into the hands of a justly angered God, but it is a wonderful thing—impossible beyond words, beyond finite human reckoning—to be secure in the hands of a loving Savior.

This devotional will bring you into close contact with the soaring theology, comforting spirituality, and invigorating exhortation of one of history’s most faithful and gifted pastors. You will see that I quote from all sorts of Edwards’s materials—letters to his friends, sermons on many biblical themes, philosophical works, and more. As you read materials that, in many cases, very few have

studied in a devotional way, you will get a sense for just how prolific Edwards's pen—and mind—were. This is intentional. If you have little familiarity with Edwards, I hope you will enjoy reading a range of his writings. And if all you've ever read from Edwards are the excerpts presented in this book, you will have read roughly 30,000 words from his pen—a lot more of his work than most people on the planet have ever read.

We follow a simple format. Each day begins with a selection from Edwards's writings, usually just a paragraph in length, and then offers brief commentary and a suggestion for application. A verse concludes the day's offering, inviting you to delve more deeply into the Scriptures that Edwards gave his life to herald. We have also spliced in numerous historical selections. These give context and showcase Edwards's endeavors, struggles, and faith. He was a sinner like us, and we lament his shortcomings. But as with every redeemed sinner, we can learn much from him. Outside of Christ, God has not left us to emulate perfect human guides, only imperfect ones (1 Corinthians 11:1; 2 Corinthians 4:5-7).

I pray that this devotional approach to the writings of Jonathan Edwards will help to strengthen your faith, hope, and spiritual practice. Discouragement is so close at hand in our day, but we can be certain that God is closer still. We see this theme throughout Edwards's writing.

At Midwestern Seminary, I teach classes on Edwards and on theology more broadly. I am confident that no writer in the great Christian tradition gives more attention to the hope of heaven than Edwards does. No theologian directs readers more insistently to think about everlasting life as an actual reality. We need this focus as human beings; in our hyperconnected age, we *especially* need to think about eternity. We will profit greatly from spending less time on all that is misfiring in our world, and more time concentrating on the glories of God. We need to be so heavenly minded, we could say, that we are of some earthly good.

It is remarkable that the church only now gains a daily devotional from Edwards's voluminous writings. As you will see, he is an inspiring motivator, counselor, and guide into the wonders of the God-made world. Two hundred sixty years after his death, Jonathan Edwards still speaks.

We who love the Word of God he preached are still listening.

January

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January 1

Of all kinds of knowledge that we can ever obtain, the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of ourselves, are the most important. As religion is the great business, for which we are created, and on which our happiness depends; and as religion consists in an intercourse between ourselves and our Maker; and so has its foundation in God's nature and ours, and in the relation that God and we stand in to each other; therefore a true knowledge of both must be needful in order to [understand] true religion.

THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL, 1754

WHAT'S THE NUTRITIONAL CONTENT of that granola bar? What SPF is that sunscreen? Can you get a weird disease by using an old microwave?

We're encouraged to gain knowledge about many things today. Scarcely does a question pop up in conversation before we have our smartphone out, Google at the ready. We crave information—and yet the more facts we learn, the less interest we tend to have in the bigger picture. This is true spiritually as well. Details crowd in; eternity gets crowded out.

Jonathan Edwards corrects this tendency of our distractible hearts. He reminds us that there is nothing more needful in a stressed-out society than the knowledge of God. This is the “great business” for which mankind exists: not simply to store up facts about the Almighty, but to draw near to our Creator in a living, loving union. Sure, we need to troubleshoot all sorts of situations in our daily lives; but we were made for something more. We were made to know God, to experience the delight of a life centered around him. In worshiping God, we discover our true purpose, gaining “knowledge of ourselves” through a biblical prism. Life isn't supposed to be self-driven; it's supposed to be God-defined.

Today, and every day, let us make it our pursuit to know God as his Word reveals him. In an age of superficial distractions and concerns, let us lose ourselves in our Creator, studying him, communing with him, worshiping him.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. ROMANS 12:2

January 2

The infinitely holy God, who always used to be esteemed by God's people, not only virtuous, but a being in whom is all possible virtue, and every virtue in the most absolute purity and perfection, and in infinitely greater brightness and amiableness than in any creature; the most perfect pattern of virtue, and the fountain from whom all others' virtue is but as beams from the sun; and who has been supposed to be, on the account of his virtue and holiness, infinitely more worthy to be esteemed, loved, honored, admired, commended, extolled and praised, than any creature . . . these things in God are good.

THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL, 1754

WE ALL HAVE BENEFITED from random acts of kindness on our behalf. For example, when I was in seminary, a man from my church in Washington, DC, bought me a computer. Forget the Corvette or the fancy clothes—a computer was just what a paper-writing student needed! It was a simple gift, but that laptop meant the world to me. We all have our memories of such acts of grace.

Typically, a kind deed will encourage us, but the boost to our spirits fades as time wears on. In his discussion of virtue—by which he means pure goodness exercised toward others—Jonathan Edwards points us beyond a momentary warming of the soul. When someone helps us in an unexpected way, we catch a glimpse of the glory and character of God. Virtue does not simply *exist*. It doesn't emerge out of cosmic blackness. It comes from the Lord, the “fountain” of all goodness and graciousness in this realm.

Random acts of kindness might seem to come out of nowhere. But we do not live in a void. We inhabit a God-made world, and every last beam of light ultimately comes from a being of total virtue. How helpful this is to remember today. In experiencing and extending kindness, we feel warmth on our faces. We have many challenges to handle, but through it all our God is good, inestimably good.

The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.

DEUTERONOMY 32:4

January 3

Resolved, that I will do whatsoever I think to be most to God's glory, and my own good, profit and pleasure, in the whole of my duration, without any consideration of the time, whether now, or never so many myriads of ages hence. Resolved to do whatever I think to be my duty, and most for the good and advantage of mankind in general. Resolved to do this, whatever difficulties I meet with, how many and how great soever.

LETTERS AND PERSONAL WRITINGS

ONE OF THE ICONIC EVENTS of my twentysomething years was the release of a new Apple product. In the Steve Jobs era, the debut of a new iPod or iPhone unleashed cultural chaos. People camped outside of retail stores for days. They stood in line for hours. They schemed and strategized to acquire the latest Apple device.

Those tech-savvy folks—displaying impressive patience—are just like us. They worked to obtain what they wanted most. If we desire season tickets for the local sports team, we scrape and scrap and find a way to buy them. If we want to present a flawless image, we put in the time to make sure that every last photo we post online looks perfect. We all devote ourselves to what we value most highly.

When Jonathan Edwards was a young man of eighteen, he resolved to live wholeheartedly for God's glory. This became his personal credo. He valued God above all and wanted to live for him. He saw no conflict between a doxological (glory-centered) lifestyle and his "own good, profit and pleasure." He believed that whatever brought glory and honor to God would also bring happiness to himself. Edwards's intentional example encourages us to approach all our days with a similar clarity. What can we do today that will glorify God—that will please him and show his greatness to others? Smartphones are great; but what words can we say, what deeds can we perform, what biblical truths can we share to magnify the Lord?

Everyone seeks out the things they love most. For followers of Jesus, joy comes not through a single event, a momentary splash, but through every moment we faithfully serve our King.

We exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. I THESSALONIANS 2:12

January 4

The same thing is evident from all the promises which God made to the Messiah, of his future glory, kingdom and success, in his office and character of a mediator: which glory could not have been obtained, if his holiness had failed, and he had been guilty of sin. God's absolute promise of any things makes the things promised necessary, and their failing to take place absolutely impossible: and in like manner it makes those things necessary, on which the thing promised depends, and without which it can't take effect.

THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL, 1754

THERE IS NO DISAPPOINTMENT quite like failing to honor your word to beloved children. We tell that energetic little boy we'll play soccer with him tomorrow, but we end up being swept along by the obligations of the hour. We set up a tea party date with the six-year-old hostess, and the dolls are all in their places; but at the appointed time we're not sipping watery tea. We sometimes struggle to remember—and keep—promises we made minutes ago, let alone days, let alone years.

Here is the wondrous truth about God the Father: Unlike you and me, he has never failed to keep a commitment. As Jonathan Edwards beautifully teaches, God's character stands behind every promise he makes. His promises are *absolute*; ours are, at best, hopeful and provisional. If the Lord tells us he will do something, it is "absolutely impossible" it will not come to pass. His perfections, ten thousand of them, stand behind every word he utters.

What a cheering word this is. The Lord does not only keep his calendar consistently; he provides for our greatest need—a Messiah who saves our souls. We may sense our inadequacy and feel that our future is uncertain, but the Word of God assures us that the Lord is leading history to its rightful conclusion in Christ (Revelation 21–22). He is in charge. He will keep his word. His purposes will not fail. Though at times we may struggle to honor our promises, we have tremendous comfort in knowing that the Lord always keeps his.

God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? NUMBERS 23:19

January 5

All the promises that were made to the church of God under the old testament, of the great enlargement of the church, and advancement of her glory, in the days of the gospel, after the coming of the Messiah: the increase of her light, liberty, holiness, joy, triumph over her enemies, etc., of which so great a part of the Old Testament consists; which are repeated so often, are so variously exhibited, so frequently introduced with great pomp and solemnity, and are so abundantly sealed with typical and symbolical representations; I say, all these promises imply, that the Messiah should perfect the work of redemption; and this implies, that he should persevere in the work which the Father had appointed him, being in all things conformed to his will.

THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL, 1754

IT COMES NATURALLY TO US to make resolutions. Granted, some people resolve not to make them; but others among us set goals we swear we will keep. Fewer cookies in the new year. A spin class every Tuesday and Thursday. Whatever the precise commitment, it is not hard to make a resolution. Resolutions are not the problem. Perseverance is. (It's when those freshly baked chocolate chip cookies come out of the oven that our resolve begins to waver.)

Thankfully, the Christian life relentlessly reminds us that we are not the standard. Jesus is. On matters both great and small. Jesus came into the world to fulfill his Father's will. He came not merely to encourage us, but chiefly to "perfect the work of redemption," as Jonathan Edwards notes. Jesus kept his word. He honored the one who sent him. He shows us a better way.

Jesus is not an indifferent Redeemer. His mission took great effort. He "learned obedience from the things he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8, NLT). His example empowers and instructs us today: Whether we join the spin class or not, we are called to persevere in the faith. There are, after all, no accidental Christians in heaven. Praise God, we are not on our own. The Holy Spirit is powerful. By the Spirit's indwelling power, we have the strength we need to push through hardship, persevere through trials, and be "in all things conformed" to the Father's will, just as Jesus was.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. HEBREWS 12:1

January 6

The saints of old trusted on the promises of a future redemption to be wrought out and completed by the Messiah, and built their comfort upon it: Abraham saw Christ's day and rejoiced; and he and the other patriarchs died in the faith of the promise of it (Hebrews 11:13). . . . But if Christ's virtue might fail, he was mistaken: his great comfort was not built so sure, as he thought it was.

THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL, 1754

EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE, we have an airline flight that reminds us of our lack of control. I had one recently—on a plane hurtling into my destination like roller coaster cars careening down the track. Times like this open our eyes to how much we have staked on someone else. Our very existence depends on a couple of pilots in the cockpit we've never met.

In a much greater sense than any airline flight, our eternal destiny rests on one man. It has always been this way. God has always called his people to trust the great promise of a serpent-crushing, sin-destroying Savior (Genesis 3:15). Jesus fulfilled this promise. Jesus is the one who did the work we could not do, and would not have wanted to do if we knew of it. God put everything on his back. Jesus did not falter or fail.

Today, we may face discouragement. We may feel as if we are hurtling through life at breakneck speed. We might be afraid of death. But we are not the final word on the matter. Our feelings are not determinative. Jesus is our hope—not we ourselves. We have “built [our] comfort” upon him, as Edwards says Abraham did. This comfort will not fail. Let us think often of this: Whatever comes our way, Christ will hold us fast. Uncertain as this life is, we know this for certain: He will bring us home.

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

HEBREW 11:13

January 7

From a vigorous, affectionate, and fervent love to God, will necessarily arise other religious affections: hence will arise an intense hatred and abhorrence of sin, fear of sin, and a dread of God's displeasure, gratitude to God for his goodness, complacency and joy in God when God is graciously and sensibly present, and grief when he is absent, and a joyful hope when a future enjoyment of God is expected, and fervent zeal for the glory of God.

RELIGIOUS AFFECTIONS, 1746

IT'S ALWAYS FUN to caravan together on a road trip. The snacks are packed, spirits are high, and the road stretches off into the distance. Soon, it's your turn to take the lead, and so you do. You direct the group to a pit stop, only to wind up at a dead end. Enjoyment gives way to embarrassment. In the heat of the moment, we don't have time for excuses or explanations. We have to find a way back to the freeway.

So it is with our sin. In his magnificent kindness, the Lord has enabled us to repent and trust Jesus as our sin-cleansing Redeemer. But though we are redeemed, we are not sinless. We must continually fight our flesh. Yet we must take care: We cannot drive into a dead end of discouragement. At times, our sin may seem so big that God seems small. But Jonathan Edwards calls us back to the bigness and greatness of God. We head back to the Bible. There, we find the Spirit stirring up in us a "vigorous, affectionate, and fervent love [for] God" as we meditate on God's works and his will.

The way out of our spiritual dilemmas, and the shame and embarrassment they cause, is not self-fixation. We confront our sin, to be sure. But in seeking its defeat, we concentrate on God. We return to him. We savor our hope, our eternal destiny, and our forgiver. Soon, we're on our way once more, the narrow path stretching out before us like the open road.

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. DEUTERONOMY 6:5