

HOLY LIVING

Jonathan Edwards's
Seventy Resolutions *for Living*
the Christian Life



MATTHEW EVERHARD

"In *Holy Living: Jonathan Edwards and the Seventy Resolutions*, Dr. Everhard has once again accented his expert research into Edwards's writings with his pastoral sensitivities. This book has many commendable attributes and features, and it is smartly organized. The introduction gives the reader a helpful overview of the life of Jonathan Edwards and his 'Resolutions' within their historical context. The resolutions are wonderfully organized into thematic groupings. Moreover, Everhard's commentary on the Resolutions is patient, interesting, and clearly from the pen of an Edwards scholar. The symbiotic relationship between Edwards's Resolutions and Diary is presented well, and Everhard's treatment of Edwards's discontinuation of his self-scrutiny with the Resolutions is instructive. Reading this book is time well spent."

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Coeditor of *Jonathan Edwards within the Enlightenment***

"A great emphasis on sanctification is needed in the modern church. *Holy Living* makes a superb contribution to this end. For Matthew Everhard takes Edwards's famous Seventy Resolutions, helpfully categorizes them, and then brings them to lively understanding and application using Edwards's own life events and writings. From now on, one will not want to have Edwards's Resolutions in hand without Matthew's work in the other!"

—**Barry York, President
Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary**

"Matthew's writing strikes an enviable balance between being studiously informed and yet accessible. Readers of *Holy Living* will not only learn much about Jonathan Edwards but, under Matthew's skillful and keen guidance through Edwards's Resolutions, will also learn much from Edwards."

—**Joshua Schendel, Executive Editor
Modern Reformation magazine**

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MATTHEW EVERHARD

 HENDRICKSON
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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vii
Abbreviations	ix
“Resolved”: An Introduction to the Life of Jonathan Edwards	1
1. Existential Resolutions: The Meaning and Purpose of Life	17
❖ Why Do We Exist in the First Place?	17
<i>Resolutions 1, 2, 3, 4, 22, 23, 27, 43, 44, 63</i>	
❖ Faith and Assurance	36
<i>Resolutions 26, 30, 32, 42, 53, 64</i>	
❖ Of Heart and Mind	47
<i>Resolutions 11, 14, 24, 25, 28, 45, 60, 65</i>	
2. Ethical Resolutions: How Then Should We Live?	63
❖ Peace, Relationships, and Self-Control	63
<i>Resolutions 15, 20, 21, 33, 39, 40, 46, 56, 58, 59, 69</i>	
❖ Speech	83
<i>Resolutions 16, 31, 34, 36, 38, 66, 70</i>	
❖ Duty, Service, and Action	94
<i>Resolutions 13, 35, 41, 54, 57, 61, 62</i>	

3. Eschatological Resolutions: The Brevity of Life and Eternal World to Come	108
❖ Life: Its Brevity and Beauty <i>Resolutions 5, 6, 7, 17, 19, 52, 67</i>	108
❖ Confession and Renewal: <i>Resolutions 8, 12, 29, 37, 47, 48, 49, 68</i>	122
❖ Heaven and Hell <i>Resolutions 9, 10, 18, 50, 51, 55</i>	136
Conclusion: Why Jonathan Edwards Stopped Using the Resolutions	148
Appendix: The Older Puritan Model of Salvation	159
About the Author	164

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Finally, I want to express my love for my wife Kelly. We have had more than twenty years together now and only an eternity together will be enough.

ABBREVIATIONS

The Works of Jonathan Edwards Series

- WJE 1 *Freedom of the Will*. Edited by Paul Ramsey. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957
- WJE 2 *Religious Affections*. Edited by John E. Smith. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959
- WJE 3 *Original Sin*. Edited by Clyde A. Holbrook. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970
- WJE 4 *The Great Awakening*. Edited by C. C. Goen. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972
- WJE 5 *Apocalyptic Writings*. Edited by Stephen J. Stein. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977
- WJE 6 *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*. Edited by Wallace E. Anderson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980
- WJE 7 *The Life of David Brainerd*. Edited by Norman Pettit. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984
- WJE 8 *Ethical Writings*. Edited by Paul Ramsey. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989
- WJE 9 *A History of the Work of Redemption*. Edited by John F. Wilson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989
- WJE 10 *Sermons and Discourses, 1720–1723*. Edited by Wilson H Kimnach. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992
- WJE 11 *Typological Writings*. Edited by Wallace E. Anderson, Mason I. Lowance Jr., and David Watters. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993
- WJE 12 *Ecclesiastical Writings*. Edited by David D. Hall. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994
- WJE 13 “*The Miscellanies*,” a–500. Edited by Thomas A. Schafer. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994

- WJE 14 *Sermons and Discourses, 1723–1729*. Edited by Kenneth P. Minkema. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997
- WJE 15 *Notes on Scripture*. Edited by Stephen J. Stein. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998
- WJE 16 *Letters and Personal Writings*. Edited by George S. Claghorn. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998
- WJE 17 *Sermons and Discourses, 1730–1733*. Edited by Mark Valeri. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999
- WJE 18 “*The Miscellanies*,” 501–832. Edited by Ava Chamberlain. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000
- WJE 19 *Sermons and Discourses, 1734–1738*. Edited by M. X. Lesser. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001
- WJE 20 “*The Miscellanies*,” 833–1152. Edited by Amy Plantinga Pauw. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002
- WJE 21 *Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith*. Edited by Sang Hyun Lee. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002
- WJE 22 *Sermons and Discourses, 1739–1742*. Edited by Harry S. Stout and Nathan O. Hatch, with Kyle P. Farley. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003
- WJE 23 “*The Miscellanies*,” 1153–1360. Edited by Douglas A. Sweeney. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004
- WJE 24 *The “Blank Bible” (Parts 1 and 2)*. Edited by Stephen J. Stein. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006
- WJE 25 *Sermons and Discourses, 1743–1758*. Edited by Wilson H. Kimnach. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006
- WJE 26 *Catalogues of Books*. Edited by Peter J. Thuesen. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008

Works cited as “WJE” are sourced from the printed editions of the Yale works above; those cited as “WJEO” in the footnotes are sourced from the digital archives, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online*, at Edwards.Yale.edu.

The Works of Jonathan Edwards

- Works I *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Volume 1*. Edited by Edward Hickman. 2 vols. 1834. Reprint ed. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974
- Works II *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: Volume 2*. Edited by Edward Hickman. 2 vols. 1834. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974

Other Abbreviations

ESV	Holy Bible, English Standard Version
HC	The Heidelberg Catechism
JEE	<i>The Jonathan Edwards Encyclopedia</i> . Edited by Harry S. Stout, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Adriaan C. Neele. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017
KJV	The King James Version (Also: AV)
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism

“Resolved”

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LIFE OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

An Overview of Edwards’s Life

The history of the world is the story of billions of regular people with just a smattering of geniuses and uniquely gifted people mixed in. A true genius comes around only every hundred years or so. A genius is a person with an extraordinary mind who leaves his or her indelible mark in at least one significant area of human thought; perhaps in philosophy, literature, science, art, mathematics, theology, film, or choreography. Rarer still are those sprinklings of people who come around every millennium or so and contribute markedly to multiple fields. Da Vinci was one such genius: he was an extraordinary painter, sculptor, inventor, and architect. About this creator of such masterpieces as the *Mona Lisa* and *The Last Supper*, it was said that he could write in Greek with one hand and in Latin with the other. Or if he preferred, Da Vinci could sketch a new inventive design with his right hand and take notes on the same project with the other. Indeed, there are really very few genuinely remarkable people!

Jonathan Edwards (1703–58) was in that small handful of one-in-a-million people.

If the hallmark of such extraordinary lives is that these people impacted not just one field of human knowledge but *many*, then Jonathan Edwards certainly qualifies. Some consider him America’s first incomparable intellect. Edwards left a legacy in the following areas: philosophy, natural science, theology, pastoral ministry, and missiology. He was, in a word, a polymath—a brilliant scholar in multiple disciplines. It is not a stretch to say that Jonathan Edwards may have been the American Colonies’ most gifted individual, though with personalities like Benjamin Franklin, George Whitefield, and George Washington alive in the same window of history, it is easy to see how Edwards could be outshined.

The famed preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said of Edwards, “I am tempted, perhaps foolishly, to compare the Puritans to the Alps, Luther and

Calvin to the Himalayas, and Jonathan Edwards to Mount Everest. He has always seemed to me to be the man most like the Apostle Paul.”¹ Allow me to brag about him just a bit to back up such vivid claims. When Jonathan Edwards was just a teenager, he wrote a detailed scientific analysis of the creaturely habits of arachnids. It *almost* made it into the premier scientific journal of his day. Consumed by the writings of scientists like Isaac Newton, Edwards wrote some penetrating early essays on the properties of light, refraction, and color waves. As a mature philosopher, he wrote the definitive treatise on the relationship between the sovereignty of God and human responsibility. *The Freedom of the Will*² has still never been bettered. Once, he wrote a state-of-the-art essay on the nature of human moral virtue, capturing the very essence of right living.³

Though many remember him only as the fire and brimstone preacher of “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,”⁴ indisputably America’s most famous sermon, many forget that Edwards was also a loving and careful missionary to the indigenous peoples of the frontier, and that his ideas on human dignity were developed by his followers to further the cause of the abolition of slavery.⁵ Truly, Jonathan Edwards possessed an incredibly gifted mind, as well as an enormous heart for God and a love of his fellow human beings.

In this book, we will be working through one of his earliest writings, and perhaps also one of his shortest: *Seventy Resolutions*.⁶ These are his personal life goals, written when he was only nineteen years old. In the next section, I will say much more about these Resolutions and their composition, but for the moment, we simply need to know that they are comprised of seventy short, pithy goals by which the young minister-in-training determined to live his life. A framework for who he wanted to become in the presence of others, and especially before the all-seeing eyes of a holy God, the Resolutions are

1. Steven J. Lawson, *The Unwavering Resolve of Jonathan Edwards* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2008), 1.

2. *The Freedom of the Will* is contained in WJEO 1.

3. *The Nature of True Virtue* is contained in WJEO 8:539ff.

4. “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” can be found in WJEO 22:404–18.

5. For more on Edwards and race, see my article “Jonathan Edwards’s Complex Views on Race,” *Modern Reformation*, Web Exclusive Articles, July 1, 2020, <https://modernreformation.org/resource-library/web-exclusive-articles/the-mod-jonathan-edwards-complex-views-on-race/>.

6. The “Resolutions” are contained in the *Two Volume Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Banner of Truth) in I:xx–xxiii and the Yale Editions of the *Works of Jonathan Edwards* in 16:753–59. Hereafter, the two volumes will be cited as *Works I* or *Works II* followed by page numbers. The printed Yale Editions (vols. 1–26) will be cited as WJE with a volume and page number following, and the digital-only volumes will be cited as WJEO with the same convention of volume and page number. All volumes, both print and digital only, can be found online at Edwards.yale.edu.

a helpful insight into the heart and mind of this verifiable genius just as he was emerging into full bloom.

Before we get to the Resolutions, however, it would be helpful for us to take a bit of a closer look at their author. Jonathan Edwards is often called America's greatest scholar. This is a fitting moniker, I think, given that Edwards was born into the colonies—Connecticut, to be precise—and lived his entire life in New England. In that sense, he was truly American. Although he died eighteen years before the founding of the United States of America in 1776, he would have considered himself a faithful subject of the British Crown. Despite his loyalties, his influence helped shape the American Colonies in their pre-Revolutionary years in ways beyond measure.

Edwards's Youth and Conversion to Christ

Edwards was the maternal grandson of one of the most renowned preachers in New England, the famed and feared Solomon Stoddard, himself revered as the "Puritan Pope of the Connecticut River Valley."⁷ Edwards's own father, Timothy Edwards, was likewise a Harvard-trained Puritan minister, who zealously raised young Jonathan to be an inscrutably precise thinker.⁸ Incidentally, Jonathan was the only male child alongside ten sisters, all of whom were over six feet tall! Raised among the "sixty feet" of his sisters,⁹ Jonathan was able to combine his father's strident intellect with his mother and sisters' deep affections. This term, "affections," would become a key idea in Edwards's thought as he analyzed the human heart. He later defined the affections as the deep inclinations and desires of the soul. So, as a precocious young child, he was raised to both *think* clearly and *feel* deeply. Head and heart. Brain and soul. Thinking and loving.

At about the age of seventeen, he had a profound conversion experience. First Timothy 1:17 impacted him like never before, and he had a "new apprehension" of the glory of Christ, the power of God, and the grace of the gospel. Striking him with its beauty and power, he felt Christ renovate his entire life as he mused on it:

Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

He knew he must live for such a great and mighty God.

7. George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 11. For more information on Solomon Stoddard, see JEE 553.

8. For more information on Timothy Edwards, see JEE 185–86.

9. Marsden, *A Life*, 18.

It's rather surprising that Edwards didn't convert earlier, especially having a pastor for both his father and his grandfather! But in those days, Puritan theology conceived of conversion as a far deeper transformation of one's life and heart; it was much more than simply signing a pledge card or raising one's hand at the end of an evangelistic meeting. The "altar call" had yet to be invented as a mode of evangelism, and true conversion was thought to take place in a series of somewhat predictable "steps," ranging from the dread of hell, to the guilt of conscience, to recognizing one's need for a Savior, to understanding the gospel, to finally resting and receiving Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. For some, these steps (the Puritan morphology of conversion) were thought to take months or even years to work through; and when Edwards told his father about his new experience of grace, his minister father had his doubts about their veracity, since his ingenious son seemed to have skipped over some of the steps too quickly.¹⁰ The tension between young Jonathan and his father on this matter later prompted him to deeply and thoughtfully study the Bible's account of the nature and process of real conversion (or salvation) in Christ.¹¹

Edwards graduated from Yale twice, once at age seventeen with his bachelor's degree (1720), and then at nineteen with his master's degree (1722). He wrote his master's thesis in Latin (as expected at that time) on the doctrine of justification by faith alone, a standard and cherished Protestant and Calvinistic theme. Edwards fell in love with the much younger Sarah Pierpont, to whom he devoted a rather fanciful love poem,¹² later marrying her and treasuring her as the love of his life (1727). Together, they raised eleven children of their own, bringing up their own "sixty feet" of godly progeny. After a couple of short pastoral internships (see more below) and a few years of serving the Reverend Stoddard as his associate pastor, Edwards finally became the senior pastor of the Church of Northampton (1729), one of the most prestigious churches west of the important city of Boston.

The Great Awakening

The single most significant event that transpired in Edwards's life and ministry was the 1740 "First Great Awakening," in which a massive spiritual revival poured out on the colonies. In one sense, we can say that his whole life up until that time anticipated this event and that he spent the rest of his

10. See the appendix for an explanation of the Puritan "morphology" of conversion.

11. Edwards fixated on this doctrine, writing several powerful works on the process of conversion, especially *The Religious Affections*, which comprises WJEO 2.

12. "Apostrophe to Sarah Pierpont" or "On Sarah Pierpont" is contained in WJE 16:789–90. For more information on Sarah, see JEE 184–85.

life reflecting on it. Even his own conversion seemed to be an anticipation in microcosm of the dynamic outpouring of God on the emerging nation in 1740. This revival was what Solomon Stoddard had been yearning for his entire life, having seen but a few smaller “harvests” (as he called them) in his many decades of pastoral ministry. It was what Timothy Edwards had hoped for his entire life as well—and now, the third-generation pastor was unexpectedly in the very center of it all.

Of course, the Great Awakening was far bigger than Jonathan Edwards. George Whitefield was the central preacher and the most galvanizing personality, perhaps the most famous man alive on the planet at that time. Depending on one’s perspective, either Whitefield followed the revival or it followed him! John and Charles Wesley were likewise contemporary, leading their blooming branches of Methodism, toggling back and forth between the Colonies and their beloved England. Gilbert Tennant, a fiery Presbyterian, was a notable revival preacher then too. There were many others as well. But the work of analyzing the revival from a biblical and theological perspective was the primary responsibility of the sharp-minded Jonathan Edwards.

Edwards’s revival-oriented writings drove him to international renown just before, but especially *during*, the peak of the revival years. In 1734–35, Northampton itself had experienced a smaller-scale revival, which was a harbinger of what was to come five years later. His description of those preceding events became sought-after literature, much acclaimed in its own time.¹³ This book, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Works of God*, put Edwards on the map internationally as Christians everywhere were eager to read of such shocking good news. A local revival like that in Northampton was an exciting beacon of hope!

In 1740, when the large-scale revival shook the Colonies with full force, Edwards rose to prominence as the cautious, well-balanced, but clearly optimistic advocate of this burgeoning movement. He had already been recognized as somewhat of an “expert” on revival, having led his own church through a renewal of fervor those short years earlier. Now, the outpourings of individual conversions, renewed communities, and revitalized local churches were taking place on an unprecedented scale. We would have to go back more than two hundred years to the time of the Reformation itself for comparable events!

This new revival, however, came with great controversy and even some bitter argumentation as Edwards fought off criticism from all quarters. Some thought the revivals were uncontrolled fanaticism. Others thought they didn’t go far enough. But Edwards ably defended the events as a legitimate outpouring of God’s gracious hand on an undeserving people. He managed to balance biblical fidelity with passionate devotion. Again, both head and heart were aglow with love for God and man.

13. See *A Faithful Narrative*, WJE 4:95–211.

The Great Awakening drew out Edwards's true intellectual genius and foisted his learning on an eager world hungry to discuss the current events that were both impossible to quench and difficult to ignore. Hardly a town, a church, or even a family were left without a member who was deeply renewed in religious zeal and the blessings of joy. Through it all, Edwards wrote significant letters, sermons, tracts, theological essays, and long philosophical works, mastering nearly every literary genre to which he lent his hand. He thought clearly, loved deeply, and wrote abundantly, pouring out what is contained today in the twenty-six official printed volumes of his written works. If we include the digital volumes that have not yet been printed, then Edwards's extant works would span wider than a basketball player's reach, from fingertip to fingertip, numbering around seventy volumes of written works.

Edwards's Removal and Death

Ironically, in 1750, the uniquely gifted Pastor Edwards was fired by his own congregation over a dispute over the Lord's Supper. Wanting to strengthen his grandfather Solomon Stoddard's requirements to participate in the sacrament of the Table, Edwards sought to limit participation to only those baptized church members who had also publicly professed their faith in Christ.¹⁴ Stoddard allowed baptized persons to participate at the Table as long as their lives were scandal free. This move to strengthen communion requirements was perceived as too hostile, and in a congregational church vote, Edwards lost by a landslide.

Although Edwards and Sarah considered a possible calling in Scotland, ultimately they chose to move their large family toward the fringe of society to serve as a missionary to the indigenous peoples. In Stockbridge, Massachusetts, he pastored a small congregation of English settlers and ministered kindly to the native peoples. In God's good grace, Edwards used these years to re-preach some of his simpler sermons and focus instead on writing some of the major treatises over which he had long been ruminating, sealing his reputation as a next-level thinker and the truly great mind of his century.

In 1758, at the age of fifty-five, just after he had been named the new president of Princeton, Edwards died after being inoculated for smallpox. Although the science of inoculation was good in principle, it hadn't yet been fully refined in practice, and the pastor-philosopher's optimism in the emerging technology led to his own untimely death after he contracted the disease

14. For an excellent chapter on Edwards's firing, see Mark Dever, "How Jonathan Edwards Got Fired, and Why It's Important for Us Today" in *A God Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, eds. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 129–44.

and his throat closed up. Sadly, Sarah died just six months later, and the Edwards family was thrown into grief-filled upheaval.

Following his death, Edwards's legacy continued to rise sharply. His disciples carried on some of his ideas, applying them more courageously than he had in areas of social concern, especially his concept of "benevolence to being in general,"¹⁵ which meant a love for God and humanity. His son Jonathan Edwards Jr. and his disciple Samuel Hopkins applied their concept of "disinterested benevolence" to race relations and slavery, working toward the abolition of that horrific institution.¹⁶ Like their mentor, they were way ahead of their time.

Since the publication of his full *Works* in the twentieth century, Edwards's reputation has skyrocketed. Like many thinkers of his caliber, it took many generations for scholarship to catch up with his ideas in order to recognize his true worth in several vast fields of human knowledge.

The Early Pastoral Years

As we study the Seventy Resolutions, which Edwards began as a teenager in late 1722 and completed on August 17, 1723, we should be somewhat familiar with this general timeframe of his life. Much of what I say about the Resolutions will be framed by the context and events of this formative period.

By 1722, Edwards had formally completed both programs of study, although he didn't submit his master's thesis until September 1723. For our purposes in this book, I am calling the five years between 1722 and 1726 his "early pastoral years." They are "early," because Edwards had not yet ascended to his famed pastoral charge of the congregation at Northampton alongside his esteemed grandfather Rev. Solomon Stoddard. Serving this church for over twenty-three years would eventually become his primary life's work. But these years are nevertheless still "pastoral" since Edwards was already actively serving in the ministry with three unique training or preparatory roles (what we might call "internships"): first, as interim pastor at a small Scottish congregation in New York City (1722–23); second, in another temporary pastorate at a congregation in Bolton (1723–24) and other preaching opportunities locally; and third, as the student tutor at Yale College (1724–26).

15. This concept is unfolded in detail in *The Nature of True Virtue*, WJEO 8:539–627. In general terms, Edwards suggests that the moral person is the one who loves all things that God has made, but especially the Creator himself.

16. Some of the best research on Edwards and slavery is being done by John T. Lowe. See, for example, his chapter "Destruction and Benevolence: The New Divinity and Origins of Abolitionism in Edwardsean Tradition," in *Jonathan Edwards within the Enlightenment: Controversy, Experience and Thought*, ed. John T. Lowe and Daniel N. Gulotta (Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 87–110.

During these years, Edwards served and practiced for the ministry in ways that emulated the life and duties of a full-time pastor, which he hoped to someday become. He dealt with real people, their faults and frailties included. He counseled church members and students through the trials of life. He preached well-prepared sermons, some of which were considered excellent. He gave lectures on theology which disciplined unruly undergraduates. Most importantly, Edwards saw himself emerging into full, mature, Christian adulthood during this period. This self-awareness is probably what led him to put pen to paper and begin his Resolutions as the cold New England winds blew in November or December of that year. If there was a trajectory he needed to take in order to become a respectable pastor like his father and grandfather, then these life goals would serve as the proper route to get there.

His time serving in New York City (1722–23) in particular was among the spiritual high points of his life as the dynamic, growing port city refreshed him. The church, which met at the corner of Broadway and Wall Street, was challenging and invigorating. His job was to help a church splinter group work through reconciliation issues with another faction. He discharged this task so well that he essentially worked himself out of a job when the church came together again peaceably.

In New York, he found deep and true friendships with a certain Madam Smith and her son John, with whom he resided during those months, marking them among the most treasured Christian relationships he had yet found. Edwards often waxed eloquent thinking back to this short time in his life. In his “Personal Narrative” (1740), he described these joyful months in glowing terms. Writing about his own Christian growth and sanctification during this specific period, he fondly recalled the following:

My sense of divine things seemed gradually to increase, till I went to preach at New York; which was about a year and a half after they began. While I was there, I felt them, very sensibly, in a much higher degree, than I had done before. My longings after God and holiness, were much increased. Pure and humble, holy and heavenly Christianity, appeared exceeding amiable to me. I felt in me a burning desire to be in everything a complete Christian; and conformed to the blessed image of Christ: and that I might live in all things, according to the pure, sweet and blessed rules of the gospel. I had an eager thirsting after progress in these things. My longings after it, put me upon pursuing and pressing after them. It was my continual strife day and night, and constant inquiry, how I should be more holy, and live more holily, and more becoming a child of God, and disciple of Christ. I sought an increase of grace and holiness, and that I might live an holy life, with vastly more earnestness, than ever I sought grace, before I had it. I used to be continually examining myself, and studying and contriving for likely ways and means, how I should live holily, with far greater diligence and earnestness, than ever I pursued anything in my life: but with too great a dependence on my own strength; which afterwards proved a great damage to me. My experience had not then taught me, as it has done since, my extreme feebleness and impotence,

every manner of way; and the innumerable and bottomless depths of secret corruption and deceit, that there was in my heart. However, I went on with my eager pursuit after more holiness; and sweet conformity to Christ.¹⁷

Clearly, this was a period in which he was excited about ministry, enthused with a newfound profundity in his relationship with Christ, relished preaching grand and joyful sermons, and was greatly strengthened by the spiritual friendships he had found with Madam Smith and her son John.¹⁸

The Writing of His Personal Resolutions

When the nineteen-year-old pastor-in-training wrote his first few Resolutions in November or December 1722, he was not necessarily doing something creative or original. Instead, he was participating in a typical Puritan-era practice that was well established at the time. It was then commonplace to write a set of short, punctiliar vows or goals to help govern one's life. George Claghorn defines the Resolutions as "firm determinations" and says that for Edwards, "they were neither pious hopes, romantic dreams, nor legalistic rules. They were instructions for life, maxims to be followed in all respects. Edwards depended on the sustaining strength of his omnipotent Deity to enable him to live up to them" (WJE 16:741).

Writing his own set of statements and guidelines put Edwards in the same class of other thought-leaders, who cared deeply about the meaning of life and the proper way to conduct themselves. George Washington, for instance, wrote one hundred and ten personal resolutions to guide his life. Most of Washington's resolutions contained rules for maintaining one's manly integrity in front of subordinates, such as not spitting in the fire, avoiding chewing one's nails, and refraining from falling asleep when others speak. Some are even a bit humorous to us today.¹⁹

Edwards's Seventy Resolutions have often been compared and contrasted with those of Benjamin Franklin. Franklin also wrote his own set of personal guidelines, although he wrote far fewer in number (thirteen). By way of comparison, both of these great intellects warned themselves against speaking afoul, sloth, and wasting time, while exhorting themselves toward maintaining good social comportment. We might summarize by saying that Franklin's personal written constitution reveals the modern influence of the progressive Enlightenment: forward thinking and more focused on being a good, productive citizen than a saint. By way of contrast, in his Resolutions, Edwards is

17. "Personal Narrative," WJE 16:795.

18. See WJE 16:797.

19. Washington's resolutions can be found at <http://davidbruce-smith.com/george-washingtons-resolutions/>.

far more concerned with his soul, his relationship with Christ, Scripture, and the things of God—especially holiness and eternity. Edwards’s Resolutions reveal the influence of the Reformation, which was far more concerned with being a faithful pilgrim than a prosperous citizen.

Among all of the voluminous writings of Jonathan Edwards, the Resolutions provide the clearest view into the inner chambers of the young man’s heart, especially when combined with his diary that he also penned in the early pastoral years. His “Personal Narrative,” which he wrote many years later as a more mature preacher and pastor, is likewise intensely introspective. In his sermons, however—and unlike most sermons from pastors today—he almost never mentioned himself, his thoughts, or his personal experiences. No self-respecting Puritan pastor ever told a personal anecdote as a sermon illustration! Thus his “Resolutions,” “Diary,” and “Personal Narrative” combine in a unique way to “provide a direct window into Edwards’s interior life,”²⁰ giving us the best view into his soul.

The influence of Edwards’s Seventy Resolutions has left a long and glorious legacy. They were initially printed in his first biography by Samuel Hopkins (1721–1803) and in an early memoir edited by Sereno E. Dwight, who seems to have been particularly affected by reading them.²¹ Both Hopkins and Dwight printed the Resolutions, although their versions differ slightly from each other. In the official version of Edwards’s *Works* printed by Yale University (WJE 16), slight differences between Dwight and Hopkins are noted in brackets. Since Edwards’s own original draft has now been lost, we have to trust that Hopkins and Dwight combined to reproduce them accurately from the papers left written in Edwards’s own hand. After those printings, the Resolutions began to circulate somewhat freely in the nineteenth century (1805, 1807, 1808, 1823, 1841, and 1877), usually included alongside period-related collections of inspirational materials such as church covenants, confessions of faith, and other pious devotional content.²² Today, many Christian believers still find them to be of great spiritual and personal value, and I trust that you too will find them helpful in your own walk with Christ.

20. Marsden, *A Life*, 50.

21. Sereno Edwards Dwight (1786–1850), the great-grandson of Jonathan Edwards, was a lawyer, Congregational minister, chaplain of the U.S. Senate (1816–17), and president of Hamilton College in New York. He inherited Edwards’s papers and published several of his works, along with an insightful memoir. This memoir is contained in the two-volume *Works* (Banner of Truth), I:xi–ccxxxiv. In 1822, Dwight published an edited volume of *The Life of David Brainerd*, and in 1829, the new, enlarged version of Edwards’s works. For more on Dwight, see David Komline, “Dwight, Sereno Edwards (1786–1850)” in JEE, edited by Harry S. Stout, 161.

22. This and other background material on the Resolutions can be found in WJE 16:750.

Notes on the Surviving Manuscripts

Although we have many of Edwards's own handwritten notes and manuscripts preserved at the Beinecke Rare Manuscript Library at Yale University, sadly we do not have the original handwritten set of the Resolutions. We have scores of his sermons in his own handwriting, many notebooks, and drafts of some of his best masterpieces, but his "Resolutions," "Diary," "Personal Narrative," and early love poem "On Sarah Pierpont" have all been tragically lost to antiquity.

Thankfully, these texts were preserved in other copies and reprints and passed down to us today. Edwards's early admirers, Hopkins and Dwight, are to be either thanked or blamed, since they both seem to have had access to the original manuscript at some point. We do still have the original cover of the Resolutions, which is labeled as manuscript number GEN MSS 151 at the Yale Manuscript Library. Interested scholars will have to content themselves to see this sole surviving scrap of the original draft, which Edwards himself made for his small notebook.

Other Early Works

The Diary

During his early pastoral years (1722–26), Edwards also began a number of other writing projects that would serve to steer the general direction of his life. Of course, we will be focusing on the Resolutions in this book, but it is difficult to separate this project from these other works that he began writing at about the same time.

Most notably, the Resolutions have a symbiotic relationship with his personal diary (WJE 10:263). This notebook served as the sounding board by which he checked himself against the Resolutions he had already written and, when necessary, chide himself for failing to live up to them. He began writing in his notebook on December 18, which is the same date as the earliest dated resolution (the 35th Resolution). If there was any section prior to this first entry, it is now lost. Early biographer and Sereno E. Dwight believed there might have been a lost section since Edwards's notebook begins abruptly, without introduction or front matter (Works I:xxiii). It seems slightly unusual for a diary in that day not to contain any sort of prefatory material.

In his diary, Edwards often graded his performance in keeping his Resolutions. These two documents intertwine with one another as a vine of clematis or morning glories climb a string toward the sun. If the Resolutions were the stringline providing guidance and direction, then the diary climbed all over it, blooming forth thoughts and reflections on his spiritual progress.

Edwards's frequent reflections in his Diary on previously written Resolutions often prompted him to write new Resolutions, especially as he saw himself failing in certain areas. The Resolutions and Diary therefore seem to be in constant conversation with each other.

Edwards began his Resolutions sometime before December 18, 1722, and finished the last of his seventy personal guidelines on August 17, 1723, just eight months later. He also began the diary around December 18, 1722 (noting that he just completed writing the 35th Resolution in his first diary entry), carrying on that project until 1735. The Diary outlived the Resolutions by ten years, although his entries grew fewer and fewer after the close of his early pastoral years. In the years 1726, 1728, 1734, and 1735, there are just a few solitary entries, which indicates that the diary's place in his life seems to have functionally lessened as the early pastoral years were closing in 1725.

The "Miscellanies" and "Notes"

Another writing project that will be of some interest to us as we go through the Resolutions is his outstanding collection of the "Miscellanies," which is in many ways truly an extraordinary project! For decades of his life, Edwards kept multiple volumes on his "miscellaneous" thoughts about Scripture, philosophy, natural science, history, and especially theology. Notably, the first miscellaneous thought was "On Holiness," which very much coincides with Edwards's striving for spiritual maturity and sanctification in his Diary and Resolutions.

Edwards also began two other projects during this time: his "Notes on the Apocalypse" (1723) and "Notes on Scripture" (1724).²³ Both of these are also cross-referenced notes systems on various biblical constructs.

Overall, his early pastoral years signify the commencement of a vast and voluminous lifetime of writing, evidencing an unusually bright and illuminated mind. By the end of this period and before he took up the call to the Northampton Church in 1726, this young pastor had already written significant works in multiple fields of human knowledge, including dozens of sermons that were both quintessentially Puritan and exemplary expositions.

When he was twenty-three, the Northampton Church called him to serve as the associate pastor to his grandfather Solomon Stoddard. By that time, Edwards had written the following literary gems: "The Spider Letter," "The Mind,"²⁴ his Latin master's *Quaestio*,²⁵ and "Apostrophe to Sarah Pierrepont [*sic*]," along with essays on light, rainbows, natural philosophy, atoms, and being/existence.

23. "Notes on the Apocalypse" can be found in WJEO 5, and "Notes on Scripture" comprises the whole of WJEO 15.

24. "The Spider Letter" and "The Mind" as well as other scientific papers can be located in WJEO 6.

25. The *Quaestio* is contained in WJEO 14:47–66.

The Beginning of the “Resolutions” Project

As stated above, Edwards wrote the first twenty-one Resolutions sometime before December 18, 1722, possibly all in the same sitting (Works I:xx). We know this because they are not individually dated, and they are all in the same pen and handwriting.²⁶ Although the original handwritten copy of his Resolutions has now been lost, Sereno Dwight, who inherited his great-grandfather's personal papers, recognized this fact as he examined the original document in his own hands. Those who handle the original handwritten manuscripts of any of Edwards's works often remark about how he varied his handwriting to suit particular purposes, changing over time, and even between particular writing sessions. At some points in the published version of the diary, Dwight mentions how Edwards wrote in an indiscernible script to purposefully make certain sections unreadable, a personal shorthand of sorts.²⁷ Dwight suggests that this was to conceal material considered too private for any other eyes than the Lord's (Works I:xxxiv; WJE 16:783).

Edwards wrote another dozen or so Resolutions (the 22nd Resolution and following) quite early, again sometime before December 18, completing his first undated batch of personal rules (Works I:xx). Beginning with the 35th Resolution, Edwards began dating the “Resolutions” individually, or in some cases, writing them in small flurries of twos or threes. He also periodically amended those he had previously written, tightening them up, and postdating them as he reflected on their meaning and importance to him.²⁸ Tight correspondence between the “Resolutions” and the diary allows us today to peer somewhat into what Edwards was thinking as he added to them. With these writings, we get a glimpse of Edwards's private life and thoughts as he wrote new Resolutions and reflected on his ability to keep them.

The “Preamble”: Striking a Delicate Balance

Preceding the Resolutions in Edwards's notebook are two sentences that set the tone for the document as a whole and shed light on his purpose for writing them, along with a short encouragement to himself to then remember them. Similar to the opening words of two other famous eighteenth-century

26. By the same “pen,” we mean the size of handwriting, manner of script, character similarity, and even the kind of ink he used with various shades and widths.

27. For example, see “Diary,” Friday, January 10, 1724. See also Dwight's comment in Works I:xxxiv and the editor's comment in WJE 16:783.

28. This explains why the 33rd Resolution is dated December 26, 1722, but the 35th Resolution is dated earlier at December 18, 1722. The later dating of the lower numbered resolution is explained by the fact that Edwards would often slightly edit or amend the resolutions, dating them as he went.

documents, the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, we will call Edwards's opening a "preamble." Where Edwards's Resolutions differ from these official political statements is the first sentence of his "preamble" is a short, humble prayer.

Taking several loose sheets of paper, nineteen-year-old Jonathan Edwards dipped his quill into a pot of ink and wrote the first sentence:

Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God's help, I do humbly entreat him by his grace to enable me to keep these Resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to his will, for Christ's sake. (WJE 16:253)

Critical to the whole text, this line is often skipped over too quickly by those who study the Resolutions. Yet it is this prayer that governs all Seventy Resolutions, as Edwards admits from the very beginning that he humbly relies on God's grace. He knows he can't do this alone. He will need divine help! Concerning this first sentence, his great-grandson Sereno Dwight commented in a rather laudatory manner:

He was too well acquainted with human weakness and frailty, even where the intentions are most sincere, to enter on any resolution rashly, or from a reliance on his own strength. He therefore in the outset looked to God for aid, who alone can afford success in the use of the best means, and in the intended accomplishment of the best purposes. This he places at the head of all his other important rules, that his whole dependence was on the grace of God, while he still proposes to recur to a frequent and serious perusal of them, in order that they might become the habitual directory of his life. (Works I:xx)²⁹

The second sentence in the preamble is likewise important to the whole. Ironically, it foreshadows the darker paradox that perhaps Edwards did not yet see in his earliest enthusiasm. It creates a tension between humble reliance on God, and dogged self-determination.³⁰ He wrote the second sentence giving himself an important assignment: "Remember to read over these Resolutions once a week" (WJE 16:754).

As we will see many times in the chapters that follow, the young pastor often toggled back and forth between making this a spiritual self-improvement project and graciously resting in and receiving the divine work of sanctification. This is especially evident as we read the symbiotic interaction between the Resolutions and the Diary. As we see later on, his diary makes it clear that he himself often lost sight of this delicate balance he intended in his opening

29. In this quotation, we can see Dwight's tendency to see Edwards's spiritual struggles from a "glass half-full" perspective. He tends to view the resolutions and the diary positively, emphasizing Edwards's desire for sanctification, but perhaps failing to note Edwards's own admitted failures.

30. See below on the 3rd Resolution.

preamble prayer. It reveals that this simple “review once a week” assignment would become a frustrating tug-of-war between Edwards’s need to review and act on those Resolutions already in force, and the constant desire to make even stronger Resolutions that might fortify him against failure. Sometimes the Resolutions were like a school assignment, and Edwards had to grade himself on his own report card in his diary.

In the months that followed, Edwards often struggled with how exactly he should “review” his Resolutions: Should he simply go over what he had already written, or write newer, stronger Resolutions when he messed up and failed? Should he track his shortcomings in some mathematical way by writing down examples of his failures, or should he simply rejoice in his victories wherever and whenever he had them? Edwards went back and forth in his own mind as to whether these occasional reviews were even helpful in the first place, and what he could possibly do when he found himself falling short of his own goals.

Nevertheless, he had a general direction and by the time the new year rolled around in January 1723, the project was moving ahead full scale. Thus, for the most part, Edwards began his Resolutions with an optimistic trajectory, hopeful for his personal growth in grace. At the same time, he drafted a rather rigorous project of self-analysis. He then began a highwire balancing act between his dependence on divine grace (the first line of the preamble) and a dogged determination to further himself by his own efforts in his walk with Christ (the second line of the preamble).

Studying the Resolutions: Three Basic Categories

To this point, I have provided a basic biographical sketch of Jonathan Edwards’s life, and we have considered the literary genre of his personal Resolutions, the colonial practice of writing and reviewing individual directives or “life goals.”³¹ We have also gone over the particular time period of Edwards’s personal development in which he wrote the Seventy Resolutions, during his brief pastorate in New York City from 1722–23, when he was nineteen years old.³²

Now we move to looking at each of the Seventy Resolutions both separately and in groups to see how they might apply to our own lives today and

31. See Donald S. Whitney, *Finding God in Solitude: The Personal Piety of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) and Its Influence on His Pastoral Ministry* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 87–93.

32. For more information about this period, see WJE 10:261–94 and WJE 16:6–8. In the introductions to the Yale Editions, see Edwards’s *Sermons and Discourses, 1720–23*, ed. Wilson H. Kimnach; and *Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn. The respective editors provide excellent sketches that shed much light on this relevant period of Edwards’s life.

help us grow in the faith. As we go through them, we will have to be careful that we don't forget about the grace of God. Whenever Edwards tried too hard and depended on his own willpower, he became stuck and frustrated. We need to be careful not to make the same mistake.

In the coming chapters, we will examine the "Resolutions" in three major categories, which I have organized not necessarily in the order they were written and numbered, but rather by larger themes. I am going to call these three categories "Existential Resolutions," "Ethical Resolutions," and "Eschatological Resolutions." The first main group, Existential Resolutions, takes up the challenge of considering what Edwards believed to be the main purpose of his life. We will think about why we exist, why we live, and what our purpose is in life. This set of Resolutions attempts to answer the question, as the Westminster Divines posed it in 1647, "What is the chief end (or purpose) of man?"³³ In this first category, we will look at the Resolutions related to our purpose in living, our questions of personal faith and assurance, and how to love God with our hearts and minds.

The second main category, Ethical Resolutions, considers what Edwards believed to be his ethical duty. Ethics is the part of philosophy or religion concerned with how we ought to live, especially in relationship to one another. In the most general terms possible, ethics helps us think about how to be a good (or better) person. In this major grouping of Resolutions, we will look at Edwards's life goals related to self-control, interpersonal relationships, controlling his speech, duty, and taking action—while asking ourselves how we likewise should then live.

Finally, in the third main category, Eschatological Resolutions, we look at those ideas related to the end of human life on earth. The word *eschatology* has as its root the Greek word *eschatos*, which means "end" or "last." Eschatology considers in detail what the Bible teaches in relationship to death, the afterlife, the return of Christ, heaven, and hell. Edwards wrote quite a bit about the end of life, thinking about death more than most do today. Of course, this is mostly due to the time period with low average lifespans. Edwards himself was only fifty-five when he died. This third cluster of Resolutions considers matters touching on the repentance of sin, the brevity of life, and the eternal world to come.

With that as our introduction, let's begin our study of his Seventy Resolutions!

33. Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q&A #1 in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville, GA: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2007), 355. For an online edition, see <https://reformedstandards.com/westminster/wsc.html>. This helpful website contains several of the primary confessions of Reformed, confessional Protestantism.