JONATHAN EDWARDS produced a comprehensive theology of the Christian life that started with God's glory and ended with all creation returning to that glory. It was a vision that remains quite simply magnificent. And yet it is a theological vision that has not been adequately explored until now.

Professor and pastor Sean Michael Lucas has converted his years of teaching into this valuable overview of Edwards's theology, exploring both redemption history and the application of God's redemptive work in the individual. As Lucas unpacks Edwards's vision in this accessible, two-part framework, the resulting revelation of God's glorious work will strengthen our understanding of Edwards and of our own Christian life.

"In this smart, accessible book, pastor-theologian Sean Lucas shows how Edwards can help us read the story of our salvation as part of the bigger story of God's redemption—what the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have done to rescue us from sin and draw us into the everlasting fellowship of their love."

PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN, President, Wheaton College; author, King Solomon

"Lucas has given us a comprehensive summary of Edwards's understanding of the Christian life that does for Edwards what Sinclair Ferguson did for John Owen. An essential and most welcome companion to any serious study of Edwards."

DEREK W. H. THOMAS, Minister of Preaching and Teaching, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina

SEAN MICHAEL LUCAS (PhD, Westminster Theological Seminary) is senior minister at First Presbyterian Church in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. He is coeditor of The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards: American Religion and the Evangelical Tradition and the author of several other books. Dr. Lucas previously taught at Covenant Theological Seminary for five years, serving as chief academic officer and associate professor of church history.

CHRISTIAN LIVING / PERSONAL GROWTH

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Introduction

During his lifetime, Jonathan Edwards was many things: pastor, preacher, reviver, husband, father, author, controversialist. But if he was anything, he was a theologian of the Christian life.

Perhaps this was because, as historian George M. Marsden notes, “he was not a saint by nature... His spiritual life was often an immense struggle. Despite his massive intellect and heroic disciplines, he was, like everyone else, a person with frailties and contradictions.” And yet, through his struggles and wrestling with God, Edwards produced a comprehensive theological vision in which he set forth an approach to the Christian life that started with God’s glory and ended with all creation returning that glory. It was a vision that remains quite simply magnificent.¹

And yet, it is a theological vision that has never been adequately explored. Historians and theologians have long argued over whether there was a “center” to Edwards’s theology, whether there was an integration point into which all of Edwards’s thought fits. Some, like the brilliant Edwards scholar Perry Miller, sought to find a modern Edwards, one that presciently spoke to the needs of a coming age and was martyred in his own. Others, such as theologian John Gerstner, found a rationalist Edwards, one that

provided theological rigor and rationalist ballast in his approach to his day and our own. Still others, such as historian Michael McClymond and biographer Phillip Gura, appealed to Edwards as the purveyor of religious experience, the ultimate apologetic for yesterday and today. One of the best books on Edwards’s theology, still in print, held that he centered his theology in the doctrine of faith. Yet another suggested that God’s glory was the beginning point.²

All of these attempts to explore Edwards’s theology have legitimacy, especially in a day when his thought often seems to be like a “great mirror” in which scholars and readers see their own concerns in his. And yet it is striking that Edwards spent the greatest amount of his time thinking about the Christian life, both for himself and then for his parishioners in his pastoral ministry.³

The Christian life certainly was a major preoccupation in his sermons, the regular work in which he engaged from 1726 until his death in 1758. Even a quick perusal of the six published volumes of sermons in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* edition produced by Yale University Press provides this sense of Edwards’s focus. From his earliest sermon, “Christian Happiness,” in which he argued that godly people are happy no matter their outward circumstances, Edwards worked the themes of holiness and happiness, seeing and savoring, majesty and meekness, light and darkness—all as representative descriptors of the Christian life. He spoke of the “pleasantness of religion,” as well as the way to be “profitable hearers of God’s Word,” pictured “the true Christian’s life [as] a journey towards heaven,” delighted in the “excellency


of Christ,” and urged his people to “renew our Covenant with God.” In a variety of ways and in a number of contexts, he sought to inculcate a deep and rich piety among his people.4

Edwards did so because it was the major preoccupation of his own life. He would later relate to his son-in-law, Aaron Burr, “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 in all things, according to the pure, sweet, and blessed rules of the gospel.” He went on to observe, “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.” He desired to raise his “religious affections” to a holy ardor through Scripture reading and prayer, attendance upon the means of grace, and encountering the spiritual relations of others.5

But Edwards’s view of piety was far more than heightened emotions. Rather, he developed a full theology and history of the Christian life, beginning in eternity past with the mutual delight that God had in himself and extending it into the future in which heaven would be a “world of love.” By rooting his understanding of God’s purposes in his own Trinitarian being, and especially God’s passion to glorify himself by communicating his glory in creation and redemption and receiving back his glory in love and praise, Edwards set forth a vision of the Christian life that was deeply theological.


Introduction

As a result, this book on Edwards’s view of the Christian life must be theological as well. The question becomes one of framework: If the Christian life was central to Edwards’s theological and pastoral reflection, how did he frame those reflections? I’d suggest that Edwards’s framework ran in two directions, or, perhaps better, at two levels. On one level, his theological vision for the Christian life was cosmic: the grand narrative of the history of the work of redemption. Edwards had intended, were he to live longer, to write a theology of the Christian life that would be “divinity in an entire new method.” Redemption would be at the center of human history, but that grand work of God would reach back to eternity past and find its fulfillment in eternity future.

Therefore, part 1 of this book focuses on “redemption history.” We will follow Edwards back to eternity past, into the very delight the persons of the Trinity had for each other; journey into time by means of God’s covenant of redemption with himself to create and purchase a people for his own glory; pay attention to history as God’s gracious works of creation and redemption unfold in space and time; watch the unfolding of that work of redemption in time through the successive revivals and reforms of the church; and thrill at the gathering up of all things on earth in heaven.6

There was a second level on which Edwards’s theological vision operated: the personal. How does this cosmic work of redemption, the “uniting of all things in Christ,” get applied to the individual’s life so that he or she becomes part of it? Part 2 focuses on “redemption applied”: God’s grace coming to individuals as a divine and supernatural light, immediately illuminating the mind, stirring the affections, and moving the will; the new sense of the heart and holy affections that lead to new Christian practices; the response of obedient faith that clings to God; the ethics of universal and disinterested benevolence to God and all

his creatures. What makes Edwards’s theology of the Christian life so pastorally and spiritually valuable is not simply the positive theological statement he makes; as a “man like us,” he recognized like no one else, save John Calvin, the reality of self-deception and the necessity of continued renewal. His patient description of what the Christian life is and is not continues to serve as an important guide for contemporary believers as they seek to live for God’s glory. He emphasized the means of grace—the ministry of the Word, sacraments, and prayer—as sustaining food in the wilderness and as means of continued communion with Christ. And his clear-sighted determination to speak to his people in every stage of their Christian journey was part of his desire that everyone reach heaven safely.

To chart these themes well means that at times this book may be rough sledding for some. Having taught on Jonathan Edwards to seminarians, I’ve walked with them through his knotty passages and complex thoughts; but these require careful thought, precise statement, and sometimes rereading. For others, there will be the temptation to reify Edwards’s vision as the standard by which all other approaches must be judged. However, the value of this capacious view of God is not merely in the details, but also in the outlines of a large view of God’s grand design. Importantly, Edwards himself recognized this. As he wrote to the College of New Jersey trustees, to unpack his theology of the Christian life in special relationship to the work of redemption was simply to pay attention to “the grand design of all God’s designs, and the summum and ultimum of all the divine operations and degrees.” To join Edwards in this big vision of God’s glorious work is to strengthen our understanding of what God has called us to be and to do in this world. By God’s mercy, such effort is worth it.7

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7Jonathan Edwards to the trustees of the College of New Jersey, October 19, 1757, WJE, 16:728.
Introduction

If there was ever a book that had a long gestation period, it is this one. I’ve been thinking and writing about Jonathan Edwards since my early days in graduate school. As a result, I have a number of people to whom I am indebted and to whom I must express my gratitude. First and foremost, Sara, Sam, Liz, Drew, and Ben Lucas deserve my thanks. Sara has known Jonathan Edwards as long as I have, since our days as college students. While we have a most uncommon union, like Edwards and his Sarah, I cannot imagine my life without my Sara or our children. Thanks as well to my parents, Steve and Susan Lucas, and my parents-in-law, Ron and Phyllis Young; grateful for your love and support.

I’m thankful to Steve Nichols and Crossway’s Justin Taylor, who encouraged me to contribute this work. I’m also grateful to the entire team at Crossway, from Al Fisher on, who have made this such a pleasure. Thanks especially to Thom Notaro, whose careful editing made this a much better book. Thanks to my teachers, mentors, and friends in Edwards studies: David Beale, George Claghorn, Sam Logan, Peter Lillback, D. G. Hart, Richard Bailey, Greg Wills, Amy Pauw, Gerald McDermott, Mark Valeri, Michael McClymond, and Doug Sweeney. I’m grateful as well for the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University; without their fine online search engine, indexes, and transcriptions (at http://edwards.yale.edu), this project would have been impossible to complete.

This project began while I was a faculty member at Cov- enant Theological Seminary. I express my gratitude to seminary president Bryan Chapell and the board of trustees for granting me a sabbatical in the spring of 2009 to work on this book. The administration and faculty were hugely supportive of my writing; for that I’m forever grateful. While I taught at Cov- enant, I worked my way through this material with two sets of students in spring 2005 and fall 2008; thank you, students, for your input, encouragement, and engagement. I also acknowledge the seminary’s permission to use “‘A Man Just Like Us’: Jonathan Edwards and Spiritual Formation for Ministerial Candidates,” Presbyterion 30, no. 1 (2004): 1–10, and “‘Divine Light, Holy
Introduction


A large portion of this book was completed after my transition to serve as senior minister at the First Presbyterian Church, Hattiesburg, Mississippi. I’m grateful to my fellow pastors, ministry staff, and elders, who encouraged me to fulfill my twin calling as pastor and writer, and who provided me extra time to complete this book on time. It is a great joy to serve with you as together we see the grace of the gospel transform us, as well as our city, for his glory. Over the last several weeks of writing, my congregation prayed for me, updated by my tweets and Facebook posts; thank you all. I’m sure you recognize some of the things in this book!

Nearly twenty years ago, when I walked onto the campus of Westminster Theological Seminary, I met a guy, my age, who was working in the bookstore. As we went to seminars together and worked in the back room of the store together, we dreamed of books we would write and made up titles for them. In God’s providence, we’ve gotten to do some of that and even have worked together on one book. We’ve had Edwards in common the entire time, but even more, a solid friendship. This book and its dedication mark that friendship and the “sweet union and communion” we’ve enjoyed in Christ.
Part One

REDEMPTION

HISTORY
It had been four years since the glow of revival began to fade in Northampton, Massachusetts. The “surprising work of God” had once again become the hum of the regular works of men and women in their day-to-day lives. As the pastor of the Congregational Church in Northampton and the one responsible for the spiritual condition of these folks, Jonathan Edwards wrestled with how to lead his people to experience once again the spiritual renewal that came through heightened, holy affections.

During this period, Edwards tried to remind his people of their spiritual experiences by publishing accounts of the awakenings for the Anglo-American world. By 1737, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* had become a key piece of the religious propaganda of the period, serving as both a report of the religious revival and a model of how such renewal might
happen in other locations. The following year he also published key sermons from the 1734–1735 awakening, expanding his sermon “Justification by Faith Alone,” as well as adding other successful revival sermons.¹

In addition, Edwards began to experiment with the sermon model. The period from 1734 to 1742 saw his greatest creativity as a preacher. He preached several long series on single texts, leading his congregation to consider 2 Corinthians 13:5, 1 Corinthians 13, Matthew 25:1–12, and 1 Peter 1:8 in multi-unit sermon series. The greatest of these sermonic experiments was his thirty-unit sermon on Isaiah 51:8, preached over six months in 1739, which has come to us as “A History of the Work of Redemption.” Historian John Wilson held that these sermons represented “a new and different kind of project” in which Edwards “transformed” the structure of the sermon in order to accomplish his larger purpose.²

Edwards’s larger purpose was to raise his congregation’s vision from its apparently mundane and petty daily concerns to find their affections engaged by the cosmic purpose that God has in his work of redemption. And God’s grand design in the work of redemption was nothing less than his own glory.

In all this God designed to accomplish the glory of the blessed Trinity in an exceeding degree. God had a design of glorifying himself from eternity, to glorify each person in the Godhead. The end must be considered as first in the order of nature and

The Glory of God

then the means, and therefore we must conceive that God having proposed this end had then, as it were, the means to choose.

Far from focusing on a merely individual salvation, Edwards rooted his understanding of the Christian life in the cosmic purpose of God himself—namely, for God to glorify himself and enjoy himself forever.³

Far from wanting an abstract theological construction with little bearing on actual Christian living, Edwards recognized that only as Christians have their vision filled with God’s grand purpose to glorify himself through his work of redemption are their affections transformed, their wills moved, and their beings engaged in benevolence toward all creation. Yet in order for believers truly to grasp such a vision, they need to see that God’s purpose to glorify himself through creation and redemption is an outflow of his own eternal being.

Trinity

Edwards’s theology of the Christian life is profoundly Trinitarian. As he said in his sermons on God’s work of redemption, God purposed to glorify each person of the Trinity in his grand design. And yet, God’s design was much more expansive than this. Edwards suggests that God’s purpose was to draw human beings into God’s own glorious life that they might share in and reflect back divine love and glory.⁴

The Psychological Analogy

God’s own being as Trinity served as a key building block in Edwards’s theological development, and Edwards staked out his position early in his ministry. In an entry in his “Miscellaneies,”

written when he was twenty years old, Edwards offered a defense of the Trinity based on the dictates of “naked reason.” Drawing from a version of the psychological analogy pioneered by Augustine in the fourth century, Edwards assumed that God exists and that God posits certain ideas about himself. These ideas of himself are unmediated and perfect; God’s self-perception serves as a type of perfect mirror or image. Such an image has of necessity always existed since God himself has always existed; just as God had no beginning, this self-reflection had no beginning either. It is “eternally begotten,” as it were.5

Further, as God contemplates this perfect idea of himself, God naturally delights in this self-reflection. As he sees his perfections, he delights in them; as this has occurred eternally, so God has had eternal and infinite delight in himself. But it is more; since this idea of himself is a perfect reflection of God, this idea returns God’s own delight. A cycle of delight passes between God and his image; indeed, infinite love and “an infinitely sweet energy we call delight,” which is a pure act, move between God and his idea. And thus, Edwards has “proved” the Trinity: “God, the idea of God, and delight in God.”

In this analogy, God the Father contemplates the expressed, eternally begotten, image of himself, God the Son; the delight that eternally processes between them is God the Holy Spirit. Edwards would extend this analogy, but never abandon it. While there are undoubtedly problems with this understanding, it is foundational for his understanding of the being of God within God’s self (ad intra).6


6To name just two problems: (1) This divine contemplation occurs within the mind of God; how do you establish real existence of the Son (idea) and Spirit (delight) outside God’s contemplation of them? (2) While the Son (idea) seems to reflect the personality of God, how does the Spirit (delight) have the two key aspects of personality—understanding and will—in this model? Importantly, Edwards himself recognized these problems and sought to address them in “Discourse on the Trinity,” in WJE, vol. 21, Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith, ed. Sang Hyun Lee (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 132–33.
Edwards would replicate this understanding and expand it in a manuscript that he worked on periodically throughout the 1730s. There he would once again argue that when we speak of God’s happiness, the account that we are wont to give of it is that God is infinitely happy in the enjoyment of himself, in perfectly beholding and infinitely loving, and rejoicing in, his own essence and perfections. And accordingly it must be supposed that God perpetually and eternally has a most perfect idea of himself, as it were an exact image and representation of himself. . . . And from hence arises a most pure and perfect energy in the Godhead, which is the divine love, complacence and joy.

In other words, God’s own happiness is at the very center of who God is.7

The Social Analogy
But Edwards would also utilize another analogy for understanding the Trinity, the social analogy. A twelfth-century theologian named Richard St. Victor apparently pioneered this understanding in the Western church, although it had a rich history in the Eastern Orthodox Church going back to the Cappadocian fathers. Edwards described the Trinity as a “society or family of the three.” All three of the persons in the Godhead have understanding and will, but each exercises his understanding and will in a specific way as part of the divine economy. All three share honor, but each receives a “peculiar honor in the society or family.” All three agree in the work of redemption, but each has a specific role in that work and receives honor for that particular role.8

And so, from all eternity, God’s own inner being was one of utter delight and love among the three. As God enjoyed eternal happiness in himself, receiving glory and honor from himself and returning glory and honor to himself, he was utterly satisfied.

7Ibid., 21:113.
in himself. As Edwards noted, “It is evident, by both Scripture and reason, that God is infinitely, eternally, unchangeably, and independently glorious and happy: that he stands in no need of, cannot be profited by, or receive anything from the creature.”

Although God was utterly satisfied within his own inner Trinitarian life, the wonder is that he decided to create the earth and populate it with human beings. According to Edwards, God’s ultimate purpose in creating the world was to communicate of his own infinite fullness of God; or rather it was his last end, that there might be a glorious and abundant emanation of his infinite fullness of good *ad extra*, or without himself, and the disposition to communicate himself or diffuse his own fullness, which we must conceive of as being originally in God as a perfection of his nature, was what moved him to create the world.

Edwards is saying something incredibly profound: God’s purpose in creating was to communicate the fullness of Trinitarian delight outside himself.

However, that is not all. God not only desires to communicate (or emanate) the overflow of his goodness and glory, but also desires for that goodness and glory to return (or to be remanated) to himself. This goodness and glory will return to God in the happiness and delight of his creation. In an early “Miscellanies” entry, Edwards observed that the happiness of the saints would be “as transcendent as the glory of God, seeing it is the same.” As the saints know the happiness that comes in response to the manifestation of God’s glory and excellency, they reflect back to God his own glory. God’s fullness is communicated and returned in a never-ending cycle of love.

This was part of the grand benefit that Christ secured for his people through his redemption: that they would be included in this Trinitarian world of happiness and delight. “Christ has

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10 Ibid., 8:433–34.
brought it to pass,” Edwards noted, “that those that the Father has given him should be brought into the household of God, that he and his Father and they should be as it were one society, one family; that his people should be in a sort admitted into that society of the three persons in the Godhead.” Here, then, is the connecting point back to Edwards’s sermons on the work of redemption: Christ’s redemption accomplishes God’s grand design of drawing God’s redeemed creation into the Trinitarian life that they might participate and communicate in the eternal happiness of God.12

Covenant

This grand design of the triune God—that of drawing redeemed creation into the very life of heaven—is accomplished by means of covenant. Edwards noted this truth in the very first sermon in his series “A History of the Work of Redemption.” “There were many things done in order to the Work of Redemption before [the fall]. Some things were done before the world was created, yea from all eternity,” he preached. “The persons of the Trinity were as it were confederated in a design and a covenant of redemption, in which the Father appointed the Son and the Son had undertaken their work, and all things to be accomplished in their work were stipulated and agreed.” In order to accomplish his purpose of glorifying himself, God established a covenant.13

In Edwards’s understanding, the covenantal structure of God’s dealing with human beings involves the covenants of redemption, works, and grace.

The Covenant of Redemption

As the language from “A History of the Work of Redemption” demonstrates, Edwards’s understanding of the covenant of redemption had two elements: it was pretemporal and it was


intra-Trinitarian. Edwards held that Christ covenanted with the other two members of the Godhead before the foundation of the world to purchase the salvation of the elect, and in so doing to glorify God himself.

The Covenant of Works

Edwards also developed a thorough understanding of a prelapsarian (i.e., prefall) covenant of works. God made a covenant with Adam, who stood as a representative of his posterity. Edwards wrote,

> It must appear to every impartial person, that Moses’ account does, with sufficient evidence, lead all mankind, to whom this account is communicated, to understand that God, in constitution [covenant] with Adam, dealt with him as a public person, and as the head of the human species, and had respect to his posterity as included in him.

Adam stood as a forefather and representative for all humanity.\(^\text{14}\)

In establishing this covenant, God required perfect obedience from Adam. If Adam had satisfied the divine demand, he would have received reward: “If Adam had stood and persevered in obedience, he would have been made happy by mere bounty and goodness; for God was not obliged to reward Adam for his perfect obedience any otherwise than by covenant, for Adam by standing would not have merited happiness.” Adam would not have received reward solely for merit; rather, God would grant “reward” because he chose to make covenant with Adam and to require certain conditions. In other words, the ground of reward was God’s own free promise; the condition was obedience.\(^\text{15}\)

Even more, if Adam had obeyed, his posterity would have received the blessing of eternal life. “If Adam had stood and got the victory, all his posterity would have had a right to the


reward without another trial,” Edwards held. “The first Adam was to have performed the condition of life; his posterity were not properly to perform any condition.” All that Adam’s posterity would have needed to do to enjoy reward was to be born. Adam would have been invited to eat from the tree of life “as a seal of his reward.” Death would have been “put out of all possibility” for Adam and his posterity. “He now enjoyed life, but if he had stood he would have been called to the tree of life to eat of that, and his life should not only have been ascertained to him forever, but he would have advanced to a higher degree of life” and a “much greater happiness.”

Although Adam did not obey, the covenant of works was not abrogated. Instead, it remains as an eternal and immutable covenant with its demands against humankind in full force. Edwards suggested that “if we speak of the covenant God has made with man stating the condition of eternal life, God never made but one with man, to wit, the covenant of works; which never yet was abrogated but is a covenant [that] stands in full force to all eternity without the failing of one tittle.” In Edwards’s estimation, the one covenant that God has made with humankind is not one of grace, but one of works. God’s requirement for humankind throughout history is the same as for Adam in the garden, namely, perfect obedience.

This requirement for humankind was restated in the Ten Commandments. Edwards equivocated a bit on whether the Ten Commandments served as a restatement of the covenant of works or as a rule of life for believers. On the one hand, “the covenant of works was here [in the Ten Commandments] exhibited to be as a schoolmaster to lead to Christ, not only for the use of that nation in the ages of the Old Testament, but for the use of God’s church throughout all ages to the end of the world.” God’s demand for perfect obedience is restated in the moral law; the threatening of


future judgment for the failure of obedience is brought to bear; and the longing for a Redeemer who could satisfy God’s wrath and fulfill the law’s demand is created.18

On the other hand, “if we regard this law now given at Mount Sinai not as a covenant of works but as a rule of life, so it is made use [of] by the Redeemer from that time to the end of the world as a directory to his people, to show them the way in which they must walk, as they would go to heaven.” The Ten Commandments then serve as a rule of life to guide the regenerate in the life that pleases God. The law drives men and women to Jesus; and Jesus drives men and women back to the law.19

_The Covenant of Grace_

However the Ten Commandments are understood, the fact is that the continuing demand of the covenant of works remains a major problem for humankind. Because of Adam’s fall, his posterity was plunged into a condition of sin and misery. Original righteousness was lost; corruption came to characterize every thought, word, and deed. Perfect and perpetual obedience became impossible. And so, God in his mercy sent Jesus as the new mediator of the covenant, the covenant of grace. But for Edwards, the covenant of grace is not different from the covenant of works; rather, he holds the two together: “The covenant of grace is not another covenant made with man upon the abrogation of [the covenant of works], but a covenant made with Christ to fulfill [the covenant of works]. And for this end came Christ into the world, to fulfill the law, or covenant of works, for all that receive him.” There are not really two covenants, but one, and the covenant of works becomes the covenant of grace for those who trust in Jesus.20

Jesus came as the great mediator, the true Adam, to fulfill all that the first Adam failed to do and to satisfy all that the covenant

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19Ibid., 9:181.
of works demanded. As Edwards preached in “A History of the Work of Redemption” sermons:

Every command that Christ obeyed may be reduced to that great and everlasting law of God that is contained in the covenant of works, that eternal rule of righteousness that God had established between himself and mankind. Christ came into the world to fulfill and answer the covenant of works, that is the covenant that is to stand forever as a rule of judgment, and that is the covenant that we had broken, and that was the covenant that must be fulfilled.

In the covenant of grace, Jesus fulfills the covenant of works and sets believers free from its demands and condemnation.21

So the covenant of grace is an absolute promise to those who believe in Jesus.22 By “absolute promise,” Edwards meant that a person’s ability to meet the covenant conditions is given by God; as a result, God is the one ultimately who made and satisfies the covenant. God made the covenant with Jesus and all the elect in him from the foundation of the world; he sent Jesus to satisfy the demands of the covenant of works through his own obedience and death; and he supplies faith and evangelical obedience to all the elect that they might trust in him. From beginning to the end, the covenant of grace relies on God’s grace.

There is nothing wanting but our willing and hearty reception of Christ, yet we shall eternally perish yet, if God is not gracious to us, and don’t make application of Christ’s benefits to our souls. We are dependent on free grace, even for ability to lay hold on Christ already offered so entirely is the gospel dispensation of mere grace. That is, we shall be saved freely and for nothing if we will but accept of Christ, but we are not able to do that of ourselves, but it is the free gift of God.

22“‘The new covenant as a mutual agreement, or as a conditional promise, is only with Christ; but as ‘covenant’ sometimes signifies an absolute promise, so it is with believers, and with none other of mankind that those that actually believe.’ “The ‘Miscellanies,’ no. 165,” WJE, 13:321.
As a result, God’s covenant of grace is absolute; God will fully accomplish the salvation of the elect.23

The covenant of grace is also binding, both for God and for his people. Edwards suggested that God “condescended to become bound to us by covenant.” In fact, God relinquishes “his absolute freedom and should cease to be merely sovereign in his dispensations toward believers when once they have believed in Christ, and should, for their more abundant consolation, become bound.” As a result, human beings can “challenge salvation of this Sovereign; they can demand it of Christ as a debt.” And God will supply his grace because he “bound himself by his oath” to do so.24

Human beings are bound to fulfill the terms of the covenant: faith and evangelical obedience. Edwards believed that humans comply with the binding terms of the covenant of grace when they believe in Jesus. He claimed that

there is an act of choice or election in true and saving faith, whereby the soul chooses Christ for its Savior, and accepts and embraces him as such. . . . Faith is a duty, which God requires of it. We are commanded to believe and unbelief is a sin forbidden of God. Faith is a duty required in the first table of the law and in the first commandment of it.

In order to gain any benefit from God’s covenant, “there is a certain condition [that] must be performed by us. We must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and accept of him as offered in the gospel for a Savior.” And yet, Edwards also recognized that people in

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24 Jonathan Edwards, “God’s Sovereignty in Salvation of Men,” in _The Works of Jonathan Edwards_, ed. Edward Hickman, 2 vols. (1834; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974), 2:854. Elsewhere Edwards wrote, “Salvation is an absolute debt to the believer from God, so that he may in justice demand it, on account of what his surety has done. For Christ has satisfied justice fully for his sin; so that it is but a thing that may be challenged, that God should now release the believer from the punishment; it is but a piece of justice that the creditor should release the debtor, when he has fully paid the debt. And again, the believer may demand eternal life, but it has been merited by Christ, by a merit of condignity. So is it contrived, that that justice that seemed to require man’s destruction, now requires his salvation.” Edwards, “Wisdom of God Displayed in the Way of Salvation,” in Hickman, _The Works of Jonathan Edwards_, 2:148.
The Glory of God

themselves cannot believe; Christ purchased this gift for all the elect: “He has purchased, that they shall have faith given them; whereby they shall be [actively] united to Christ, and so have a [pleadable] title to his benefits.”

Edwards favored marital imagery when talking about how God and humans are mutually bound to each other in the covenant of grace. Both husband and wife pledge to fulfill certain responsibilities in marriage. In the same way, God and humans both fulfill certain responsibilities in order to be in covenant with one another. “Love desires that the right be mutual,” Edwards observed.

The lover desires, not only to have a right to the beloved, but that the beloved should also have a right to him. Provision is also made for this, in this wise method of salvation, that God should have a special propriety in the redeemed, that they should be in a distinguishing manner his, that they should be his peculiar people.

Hence, in the covenant, the believer has the right to claim the blessings of God, as summed up in the divine promise, “I will be your God.” Not only do we have a “claim” upon God; he also has a claim upon his people that they should be his “peculiar people.” God derives enjoyment from his people as he basks in the light of their delight, love, and praise.

Trinitarian Purpose

What we cannot and must not miss is that the whole focus of God’s covenant promise to gain a people for himself through Jesus Christ is his own glory. When all human history is completed and all of God’s covenantal purposes are accomplished in this work of redemption, the triune God will be perfectly glorified: “And now shall Christ the great Redeemer be most perfectly glorified, and God the Father shall be glorified in him, and the

God’s Grand Design

Holy Ghost shall [be] most fully glorified in the perfection of his work in the hearts of all the church.” The grand design of God will be completed at the end of the age when all of his decrees are accomplished, his covenant is fulfilled, and his glory, wisdom, and power are on full display in the saints of God.27

Far from developing a dry theological schema, Edwards believed that pointing his people to the Trinity’s covenantal purpose would inflame their hearts and draw out their praise. After all, in tracing the history of God’s redemptive work, “we see where it issues: as it began in God, so it ends in God. God is the infinite ocean into which it empties itself.” And because the entirety of human history starts and ends with the triune God, the people of God should orient their entire beings to this eschatological and doxological purpose.28

28Ibid., 9:519.
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SEAN MICHAEL LUCAS (PhD, Westminster Theological Seminary) is senior minister at First Presbyterian Church in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. He is coeditor of The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards: American Religion and the Evangelical Tradition and the author of several other books. Dr. Lucas previously taught at Covenant Theological Seminary for five years, serving as chief academic officer and associate professor of church history.