

Perseverance & Procrastination: Lessons from the Life of Jonathan Edwards

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[0 : 00] Well, once again, in this season of not being able to sing publicly, I will quote from another song for us, as I've done in the last couple of days. Monday morning feels so bad, everybody seems to nag me. Coming Tuesday, I feel better, even my old man looks good. Wednesday, just don't go. Thursday goes too slow. I've got Friday on my mind. Going to have fun in the city, to be with my girl. She's so pretty. She looks fine. She's out of sight to me. Tonight I spend my bread. Tonight I lose my head. Tonight I've got to get to bed. On Monday, I've got Friday on my mind. Now, for those history buffs amongst us, those musical history buffs amongst us, you will know that that is the most popular song, voted the most popular song in Australia for all time. Friday on my mind by the Easy Beats. Easy Beats. Easy Beats. Easy Beats. It catches the song. The reason why they reckon it is so popular in our country or has been so popular in our country is that it catches something of the Aussie psychic. From the day

I start working on Monday, I'm looking forward to the day I finish working on Friday. I just want this whole work thing to be over and done with. Many years ago in London, they did a survey of why the show Home and Away was so popular in England. And to everyone's surprise, it wasn't the acting. Number one rank was because no one appears to be working. Early retirement is a goal in our country. And yet, very few of us would say that we are lazy. Very few of us would say that we are in fact lazy. We're busy. Up early, up late, even those who are retired often talk about life is just as busy now. The schedule is filled from beginning to end.

And so we would naturally react to any accusations at all of being lazy. We're busy. That is until it's possible we see that our busyness is an expression of our laziness. And not diligence. That is, there's a difference between busyness and fruitfulness. We can be simultaneously busy and lazy.

at the same time. That is, it's quite possible to be a hectic slug. Busyness does not mean I am diligent or faithful or fruitful. And it seems that that passage that Kel just read out to us from Thessalonians, that there were some there who were genuinely lazy.

2 Corinthians, sorry, 2 Thessalonians 3.11, we hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy. They are busy bodies. That is, there are some in the church who are sitting back, taking it easy, simply cruising through. It's not that they can't work. It's just that they refuse to work. And in the context of 2 Thessalonians, it's not necessarily that they refuse just to work in the sense of getting a job and earning their keep. That's part of what's happening there. But it's also they refuse to pay their part in the body of believers and make a contribution to the life of the believers.

[4 : 09] And Paul commands the Thessalonians to keep away from such people in verse 6. That's how serious he sees this matter. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching that you receive from us. They are not busy. They are busy bodies, using their time to poke into other people's business. They are vultures, not just feeding on their brother's food, but in fact on their lives as well. In the end, Paul's perspective on laziness is about having a Christian perspective on life. This is not about having a strong Protestant work ethic. That's not what this passage is about. It's about living daily with a kingdom of God mindset.

This is a spiritual issue. And I think that's why in verse 13, Paul goes on to say, And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right.

What he's saying there is, it's not just about, you know, get out of bed and get a job. He's actually saying, get busy with what is right. Get busy in pursuing the kingdom of God.

So it's not just a simply a call to be busy. It's be busy doing the kingdom. What is right. What he's saying here is, it's quite possible for you to be the busiest person in the world. You know, you're working seven days a week. You're a workaholic.

And yet to be a lazy procrastinator in the kingdom of God at the same time. It is a hectic kingdom slug.

[6 : 12] Procrastination means I can be busy neglecting the most important work and busy knocking out to-do list after to-do list, filled with tasks of secondary importance.

So what I want to do this morning is something a little bit different. I want to get some inspiration for us from the past. The New Testament letter to the Hebrews is written to a bunch of Christians who are losing sight of what it means to follow Jesus in all of their life.

And the most famous section of the letter is the bit from chapter 11, 1 through to 12, verse 3. It's the section about the great examples of faith, the great cloud of witnesses that the writer of the Hebrews points these people to, the recipients of this letter, to look to as people who have run the race of perseverance.

They have endured. He's hoping to inspire the Hebrews with examples of those who have gone before them to be faithful, focused disciples of the Lord Jesus, despite the distractions and the persecutions and the difficulties.

And chapter 12, verse 1 in Hebrews is the main application of the section. In fact, it's one word is the main application of that whole section.

[7 : 52] It's a three-letter command in chapter 12, verse 1 that says, run, run.

Everything else supports it, explains it, give motivation for it. Run the race set before you. Now, what a command to a church that was getting old, was settling into the world, losing its wartime mentality, starting to drift through life without focus, without vigilance, without energy.

Their hands were growing weak, we are told in chapter 12, verse 12. Their knees were feeble. It was just easier to meander through the crowd in life rather than run the race of perseverance, of faith in Jesus Christ.

And so against this mentality, the writer to Hebrews calls the church to endure, to persevere, to run, to fight, to be alert, to be strengthened.

Don't drift. Don't neglect. Don't be sluggish. Don't stroll. Don't meander. Don't wander aimlessly. Don't take your eternal security for granted. Run. Run.

[9 : 01] Run. Run as in a race with a finish line, with everything hanging on that finish line. Run. Fight the fight of faith on the basis of Christ's spectacular death and resurrection.

Run. Now, we need help here. We are so easily distracted in our modern world.

And so I want to turn to someone who would have been included in Hebrews 11 list of faithful had the list extended into the 18th century.

That's my task for us today. I want to look. I love biography. I love getting close to mostly dead people.

And to look at their life and how they ran the race of endurance right to the end. And so I want to take us to Jonathan Edwards.

[10:09] A life on the run. Jonathan Edwards was born October 5, 1703.

He died on March 22, 1758. He was a preacher, theologian, a missionary to Native Americans. Edwards is considered now by both secular and evangelical historians alike as the greatest Protestant thinker that America has ever produced.

That's an astounding claim from both secular and evangelical scholars. He was a small town pastor for 23 years in a church of about 600 people.

He was a missionary to Native Americans for about seven years. And the president of Princeton University for a few months just before he died.

He reared 11 faithful children. I'm contributing his wife to part of that as well at least. He worked without the help of electricity, without word processors, without emails, without iPhones, and even without sufficient paper to write on.

[11:27] And he lived only until he was 54. I'm 51 now, so three more years longer than me. That's all he had. And yet this man was used by God to lead one of the greatest spiritual awakenings of modern times.

He wrote theological books that had ministered for more than 200 years across cultures and did more for the modern missionary movement than any person of his generation.

Now, as a teenager, Edwards, mark that, as a teenager, Edwards wrote down 70 resolutions that would govern his life and to help cultivate growth in grace.

As a teenager. You can go online, Google it, Edwards resolutions, and you get a whole 70 of them there in front of you. And he went on to re-read that list of resolutions at least once a week for the rest of his life to keep his mind focused and his heart renewed week in and week out.

Now, these resolutions sustained him. Sustained his vision of God and drove him to persevere and to grow as a disciple of Jesus.

[13:07] That he would not become spiritually lazy. Now, there are four of them that I want to... Or four challenges. I'll look at a few of the resolutions.

But four challenges from the life of Edwards that are designed to deal with spiritual laziness and procrastination. Firstly, Edwards challenges us to a radical, single-mindedness in our occupation with spiritual things.

Two of his resolutions that he made in 1723 when he wasn't yet 20 years old. Resolution number 44. Resolved.

That no other end but religion. Now, when he says religion, what he means by that in his day and age, what he means by that is Christianity, the Christian faith. Resolved.

Resolved. That no other end but religion shall have any influence at all in any of my actions. And that no action shall be in the least circumstance any otherwise than the religious end will carry it.

[14:17] Resolution 61. Resolved. That I will not give way to that listlessness which I find unbends and relaxes my mind.

In his day, he would call it technology possibly. TV. Will not give way to that listlessness which I find unbends and relaxes my mind from being fully and fixedly set on religion, whatever excuse I may have for it.

I think that's the application of Paul's principle of 2 Timothy 2, 4 to 6 where he says, no one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs. He wants to please his commanding officer.

Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules. The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops.

What happens, I think, for many of us in the busyness and the difficulty of life is we start to give way to amusements and diversions and hobbies.

[15 : 30] Just to survive emotionally. I'm not saying TV is evil. Don't go through on brick through. I'm not saying that at all.

Or hobbies are really bad. I actually think you should have a balance in life. What I'm saying is they become dominant. They become escapes for us. The evenings and the days off are filled with harmless, enjoyable diversions and then they take over and the whole focus changes for us.

The radical urgency of kingdom priorities fade. The wartime mentality shifts to a peacetime mentality. The lifestyle starts to get cushy.

The all-consuming singleness of vision starts to evaporate. I mean, and this is a genuine question here.

How many Christians do you know that are laboring to know God? I'm not asking how many do you know who are reading the Bible.

[16 : 36] I'm asking how many Christians do you know who are actually laboring, striving to know God? Who are striving earnestly in study and prayer to enlarge their vision of God?

So the first exaltation from Edwards is to be radically single-minded in our occupation of spiritual things. Edwards' second challenge to labor earnestly to know the Bible itself, to know the scriptures.

That is, don't get your vision of God secondhand. You know, don't even let Jonathan Edwards be your vision of God.

Don't let J.I. Packer or Tim Keller or even week in and week out preaching here at St. Paul's to be your vision of God. This was an example that Edwards himself sets.

An early biographer of Edwards said this about him, that when he first came into his pastoral role in Northampton, he said he had studied theology, not chiefly in systems or commentaries, but in the Bible.

[17 : 48] Edwards himself once said in a sermon, Be assiduous, that is, showing great care and perseverance.

In reading the holy scriptures, this is the fountain whence all knowledge in divinity must be derived. Therefore, let not this treasure lie by you neglected.

He set an incredible example of this in his own diligence in studying the Bible himself. What he did was, he took a Bible, he got a Bible, he took it apart, unbound the whole thing, separated every page and put a separate blank page in between every other page, and then bound the whole thing back up again.

He then drew a line down the center of each blank page, two columns for notes, and on every single page he wrote extensive notes, extensive notes.

In fact, he wrote extensive notes this way, and when he ran out of paper, he then wrote extensive notes the other way, in a different color. And I think there's a genuine reason to believe that Edwards really did follow through on his 28th resolution, resolved to study the scriptures so steadily, constantly, and frequently, as that I may find and plainly perceive myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.

[19 : 39] I find that resolution to be a rebuke. How many of us actually have a plan to grow in our grasp of the whole terrain of the Bible?

Do we labor over God's word in such a way that we can plainly see today that we understand something in God's word about God that we did not understand yesterday?

Many of us might, maybe that's an overstatement, some of us might work at reading books on theology and church life with a view to growing, but have no plan and no sustained effort to move steadily and constantly forward in our understanding of God's word because it enlarges our vision of God.

Study the Bible so steadily and constantly and frequently that you can clearly perceive yourself to grow in them.

So here's a bit of a challenge as we're looking forward to New Year's resolutions. Even by the end of the day, write down something, at least one thing, if not several things, of things that you'll grapple with in the Christian faith that I want this resolved when I get back here and I reflected this in 12 months.

[21 : 02] I want to move forward on that issue. Resolution 11 is one of the reasons he made such amazing progress in the understanding of God.

It says, resolved. When I think of any theorem in divinity to be solved, immediately to do what I can towards solving it, if circumstances do not hinder.

That is, Edwards was not a passive reader. He read with a view of solving problems. Most of us, I think, are cursed with a bent towards passive reading.

We read the way we watch a TV. We don't ask questions as we read. We don't ask, why does this sentence follow that sentence?

How does this paragraph relate to the one, three pages earlier? We don't, we're passive. We don't ferret out the order of thought or ponder the meaning of terms.

[22 : 14] And if we see a problem, we habitually leave the problems to the experts. Challenge number three, Edwards challenges to redeem the time and to do what our hand finds to do with all of our might.

His sixth resolution for life was very simple and quite powerful. Resolved to live with all my might while I do live. That's pretty simple.

Resolution five was similar. Resolved never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can. He was a great believer in doing what you could in the time you have rather than putting things off to a more convenient time.

I'll get to that job tomorrow, that kind of thing. He just focused on doing it now. He was disciplined in mind, in body, and in every aspect. He's habits and everything in life.

Edwards could spend up to 13 hours a day in his study, which is why I attribute his wife to the raising of 11 faithful children. He rose early, even for non-electrical days.

[23 : 38] In fact, he was probably entirely serious, probably, when he wrote in his diary in 1728, I think Christ has recommended rising early in the morning by his rising from the grave very early in the morning.

I commend for your consideration whether such care to maximize time and effectiveness in devotion to the pursuit of God in the word was what the preacher meant when he says in Ecclesiastes 9, verse 10, Work with all of your might.

Fourthly, the theological labor of Edwards challenges us to study for the sake of heartfelt worship and for practical obedience.

That is, the sweet marriage of reason and affection, of thought and feeling, of head and heart, of study and worship that took place in the life of Jonathan Edwards has been very rare since that day.

The final exhortation is to recover what the Puritans called logic on fire.

[25 : 18] That is, the fire of joy and obedience. Edwards did not pursue a passion of God because it was icing on the cake of faith.

For him, faith was grounded in a sense of God which was more than what reason alone could ever deliver. In other words, there is no avail merely to believe that God is holy and merciful.

For Edwards, that was not enough. For that belief to be of any saving value, we must have a true delight in it for what it is in itself.

Otherwise, he says, as the Bible says, knowledge of God that does not overflow into worship of God, that's just what the devil has.

It's no different. Does that mean all of his studying was in vain? Not at all. He said this, the more you have a rational knowledge of divine things, the more opportunity will there be when the spirit shall be breathed into your heart to see the excellency of these things and to taste the sweetness of these things.

[26 : 43] that is the goal for Edwards is not just to know God but to delight in him to savour him to relish him for all of his intellectual might and he had an incredible might intellectually Edwards was the furthest thing you could imagine from a cool, detached, neutral disinterested academic he was as intent on cultivating passion for God as he was cultivating knowledge of God and the two went together for him he said seek not to grow in knowledge chiefly for the sake of applause and to enable you to dispute with others but seek it for the benefit of your souls and in order to practice according to what knowledge you have this will be the way in fact to know more he says the moment the moment you study something and you do and you grasp something a knowledge of God and you do not put that knowledge of God into immediate effect in practice he said that is when you cut yourself off from discovering anything more from God the greatest thing I think we can ever learn from Edwards is that God is glorified not mostly by being known nor by being dutifully obeyed he is glorified most by being enjoyed he wrote this

God is glorified not only by his glory being seen but by its being rejoiced in when those who see it delight in it God is more glorified than if they just see it that is the worship of God joy and delight is the goal of a disciplined life do you get that in Edwards up until this point you could go well this guy is just nuts you're taking away all of my joy and my happiness and Edwards says no no no you labor you strive for joy he says laziness procrastination meandering wandering not running robs you of delight in life delight in God and so as we come to the end of another year and as we look forward to the year that is to be and as just around the corner are things like new year's resolutions if you are someone who's not in the habit of doing new year's resolutions can I ask you to change it this year just for this one thing step into a new year with a plan to run run run run with Jesus in 2021 develop a plan to deal with the procrastination and grow in grace and knowledge and joy this year this next year friends news of a terminal illness or attending a funeral often times when we start to focus on life and what it really matters in life the beginning of a new year is in fact a close third number three we must labor to ensure that the most important things stay the most important things be inspired get some plans in place to grow in the important don't coast don't meander redeem the time the big focus for us as a church for the next five years is for people the majority of us as a church to be able to self-identify that we have grown much in the faith in the Lord Jesus and personal relationship with him in the Bible and in prayer is the most significant first step you will not grow in knowledge of God in delight in God in joy without engagement with him in his word and prayer and so

I've got a free book for someone who wants to start that journey free book from anyone now if you're online you're going oh man I've got one reserved for someone online as well so you just send me an email drop a note into St. Paul's and I will post it to you with great delight this one here this one is this one if you follow it to its fullness it will take you through the entire Bible in one year keep doing that for the next five years and you will start to get the scope of God's word you will start to see the landscape you will start to get deeper and deeper and knowledge of him yeah did I say five years yes that's exactly what I said five years who wants it I mean seriously it's for free thank you Nolene wonderful can I just say one last but very significant point this is reading from the beginning of

Edward's resolutions very important 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 all for the sake of Christ Edwards knew that even with all his intellectual might he was just as human as we are and that he was just as likely to be distracted as anyone else that is he knew his effort alone would not be enough to carry him his personality alone would not be enough to carry him his giftedness from God alone would not be enough to carry him it is only by God's enabling that he would be able to stay focused on what was the important and so he prayed prayed prayed prayed and looked to

God for enabling for that giftedness day in and day out to stay focused he prayed for God to enable him to stay the course and not deviate his life into trivia and irrelevancies let's pray our gracious and most merciful heavenly father you tell us in your word in Romans 15 verse 4 that whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction that through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope you promised that everything written in your word was put there by you for the sake of our endurance that we might run no matter what the sufferings the trials the afflictions the distractions you have given us all that we need in life in order to not lose hope but in fact to be encouraged to press on in faith and experience delight and joy in you and yet how finite and limited and fickle we are as humans what you've thrown in front of us today

[35 : 16] Lord just really briefly is a man who took your word seriously and laboured to know you he overcame and through his work and many others have endured in faith as we launch into another year may it be different different as previous years may we run with endurance the race that you put before us looking only to Jesus may the Lord Jesus be the deepest source of all of our endurance may we see and saviour him in your word and find in him our strength to keep striving against sin Satan and sabotage so we ask you merciful father to send your spirit as we engage your word we pray that you would fill our hearts with knowledge of you our hearts with joy in you give us that deep sense of delight of seeing you so may your grace enable us to work hard to know you rather than being an excuse for spiritual laziness this coming year and we ask that

Christ might be glorified amen