



A NEW INNER RELISH

CHRISTIAN MOTIVATION IN THE THOUGHT OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

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**CHRISTIAN
FOCUS**





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*For Stacey –
Encourager and Best Friend*





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One of the main ways God's grace washes into my life is through the people across whose path He brings me. One becomes keenly aware of this mercy in undertaking even a small writing project such as this one. The fingerprints of those whose hearts have shaped mine are etched into the fabric of this book, though perhaps only visibly to the author. So I marvel at the kindness of God in shaping me through the influence of the following saints and fellow friends of Edwards.

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The many remaining shortcomings are due not to their suggestions but the author's stubbornness.

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Finally, thank You, God of history, for Jonathan Edwards. I worship this man no more than a patient the scalpel in his surgeon's hand. Edwards was a fault-laden sinner. Yet through him You have given me new eyes to look beyond the domesticated deity that is the best my puny mind can summon to see with wonder the Lord of glory. Words will not express what he means to me. Thank You for performing eye surgery with the scalpel of a skinny Northampton preacher. The cuts were painful. But the view is breathtaking.

As my first book, this project is dedicated to the person who has first place in my heart. Perhaps one day, Stacey, I'll discover words to tell you what your affirmation and encouragement mean to me.

This book exists so that the sun and center of the universe, Jesus Christ, might shine more brightly in the life of His Church. If this is accomplished in any degree, the labor has been worth it. *Soli deo gloria.*

Dane Ortlund
St. Louis, Missouri
Easter 2007





INTRODUCTION

Why should twenty-first-century Christians listen to Jonathan Edwards?

After all, Edwards was born three hundred years ago in an obscure Connecticut town. He never benefited from a laptop, a microphone, Google, or American Airlines. Colonial New England knew nothing of automobiles, credit cards, iPods, cell phones, or professional sports. The powdered wigs which grace surviving portraits of early eighteenth-century aristocrats seem to relay not only an outer sternness but an inner austerity to match. Tolerance-embracing postmoderns today would perhaps welcome him into Starbucks no more readily than Marilla Ricker a century ago, according to whom Edwards 'believed in the worst God, preached the worst sermons, and had the worst religion of any human being who ever lived on this continent.'¹

Not only his times but his own life was obscure. Edwards never wrote a biblical commentary, nor did he travel outside his native New England.² After laboring for twenty-four years in a single church on what was then the

¹ Marilla M. Ricker, *Jonathan Edwards: The Divine Who Filled the Air with Damnation and Proved the Total Depravity of God* (New York: American Freethought Tract Society, 1918), quoted in Kenneth P. Minkema, 'Jonathan Edwards in the Twentieth Century,' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47/4 (2004): 660.

² His British contemporary George Whitefield, by contrast, traveled to America seven times (Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the 18th Century Revival* [2 vols.; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1970, 1980], 2:438). Yet Edwards himself 'never crossed the Atlantic, remaining all his life in the American colonies, and even here he did little traveling' (Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: Moderatism, Pietism, and Awakening* [5 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 5:248).





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edge of the world, a vote of ten to one eventually expelled him from this charge. He endured his final brief years in the untamed wilderness of western Massachusetts, living with and ministering to a handful of Native Americans and a few white families before abruptly becoming 'the deadest of dead white guys' at age fifty-five.³ One recent biographer pointedly concludes that Edwards 'by his own standards as well as those of his day had a disappointing – some might even say a failed – career.'⁴ The sermon that single-handedly keeps the preacher of Northampton in high school American literature texts, moreover, proclaims neither the love nor the grace nor the power of God, but His anger. Edwards never saw his sixtieth birthday. And his family? George Marsden sums up the Edwards heritage: 'his grandmother was an incorrigible profligate, his great-aunt committed infanticide, and his great-uncle was an ax-murderer.'⁵

Perhaps we should be more eager to forget such a man than remember him, let alone learn from him.

UNYIELDING THEOCENTRISM

Yet Jonathan Edwards must be heard today. Not because he was an intellectual giant (though he was). Nor because secular academicians, owning no interest in the Savior for

³ Christine Leigh Heyrman, 'Mark Noll's Master Synthesis,' *Church History* 72/3 (2003): 617. His great-grandson, Sereno E. Dwight, writes: 'He was born in an obscure village, in which the ancient reign of barbarism was only beginning to yield to the inroads of culture and civilization; in a colony comprising but here and there a settlement; and in a country literally in its infancy, constituting with the exception of now and then a white plantation, one vast continuous forest, and distant three thousand miles from Europe, the seat of arts, refinement, and knowledge' (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [1834; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003], ccxxx).

⁴ Philip F. Gura, *Jonathan Edwards: America's Evangelical* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), xi.

⁵ George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 22.





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whom he poured out his life, revere him as the greatest philosopher-theologian in American history (though they do).⁶ Nor because he wrote with singular beauty of prose (he did not). Jonathan Edwards must be heard today because he exhaled the air of eternity as one intoxicated with the resplendent beauty of the immortal God in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This was his all-consuming passion as he lived under an awareness of and enthrallment with God foreign to vast portions of the church today.⁷ Yes, we need the intellect of this remarkable man. More than this, though, we twenty-first-century Christians need his colossal vision of Almighty God – the God who motivates.

Edwards was a sinner. My aim is not to elevate him to superhuman status. He struggled tremendously, for example, with pride.⁸ Nevertheless in two specific ways he stands uniquely qualified in deserving our attention. We

⁶ The late Perry Miller of Yale University, for example, is principally responsible for the surge in interest in Edwards in secular academia in the late twentieth century. Yet (it appears) he never bought into the faith of the man whose mind he studied with such admiration.

⁷ David F. Wells, in our time, has labored to awaken the Western church from its neglect of the pre-eminence of God. The evangelical church, says Wells, 'has lost its traditional understanding of the centrality and sufficiency of God' (*No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 296). 'It is one of the defining marks of Our Time,' he writes elsewhere, 'that God is now weightless. I do not mean by this that he is ethereal but rather that he has become unimportant. He rests upon the world so inconsequentially as not to be noticeable. He has lost his saliency for human life. Those who assure the pollsters of their belief in God's existence may nonetheless consider him less interesting than television, his commands less authoritative than their appetites for affluence and influence, his judgment no more awe-inspiring than the evening news, and his truth less compelling than the advertisers' sweet fog of flattery and lies. That is weightlessness' (*God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], 88). See also *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 58.

⁸ Marsden, *Edwards*, 5-6, 45, 51, 225, 373; Gura, *Edwards*, 230-31; editor's introduction in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 17, *Sermons and*





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note these before returning to the overarching reason we should heed the words of Jonathan Edwards.

'THEOLOGY ON FIRE'

First, Edwards was a man of both remarkable intellect and warm piety. The rarity with which this blend is found in a single person need hardly be demonstrated. For too many geniuses, humility and holiness are sacrificed on the altar of intellect-fueled arrogance. Intelligence leads to pride – worship of the beneficiary rather than the Benefactor. Human sinfulness rarely allows genuine piety to exist, let alone flourish, in the presence of intellectual superiority. Yet Edwards was a man of both head and heart – his was 'an intellect fired by, and filled with, the Holy Spirit.'⁹

This blend is poignantly seen in the different reasons for which Edwards has been studied. On the one hand, secular academicians (such as Perry Miller) have made life pursuits out of Jonathan Edwards. It is a tragic irony that Miller – it would appear – never experienced the saving and motivating power of the God Edwards preached, the God to whom Edwards attributed any intellectual gifting he had. Yet on the other hand Edwards was himself driven by a relentless pursuit of holiness, and many are drawn to him

Discourses, 1730–1733, ed. Mark Valeri (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 29. Iain Murray comments likewise: 'When Edwards ... spoke of pride as *the* sin of the human heart he was speaking from experience as well as from Scripture' (*Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987], 33). Nevertheless Perry Miller doubtless overstates the point when in a chapter entitled simply 'Hubris,' he describes Edwards as 'proud and overbearing and rash' and, alluding to the metaphor in 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,' calls him 'a fiendish torturer of writhing spiders' (*Jonathan Edwards* [New York: William Sloane, 1949], 210, 221).

⁹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, 'Jonathan Edwards and the Crucial Importance of Revival,' in *The Puritan Experiment in the New World* (Huntington, Cambs.: Westminster Conference, 1976), 113. 'What makes Edwards such a brilliant star on the horizon of American Christianity,' concurs H. O. Old, 'is his conjunction of learning and piety' (*Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, 5:249).





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not by his mind but his heart. His desire to promote godly living in both himself and others colors his language through and through, bringing one biographer to comment that 'his studying was another kind of worship.'¹⁰ In Warfield's words, 'the peculiarity of Edwards' theological work is due to the union in it of the richest religious sentiment with the highest intellectual powers.'¹¹ Perhaps the secret to his intellectually rigorous piety was resolution number forty-four: 'Resolved, that no other end but religion, shall have any influence at all on any of my actions; and that no action shall be, in the least circumstance, any otherwise than the religious end will carry it.'¹² Light and heat, to use his own frequently employed metaphor, are not meant to exist at odds but to mutually reinforce one another as inseparable elements of healthy Christianity. Edwards possessed both, vindicating Martyn Lloyd-Jones' memorable metaphor: his was a 'theology on fire.'¹³

REASON AND REVELATION

The second unique blend in this man has to do with *reason* and *revelation*, those two channels of knowledge so often set against each other. On the one hand, Edwards thought hard about the subjects on which he wrote. He elevated reason almost as high as anyone.¹⁴ At the same time, he was utterly childlike in his attitude toward the Bible, ever

¹⁰ Marsden, *Edwards*, 432.

¹¹ B. B. Warfield, 'Edwards and the New England Theology,' *Biblical and Theological Studies: Vol. 10*, 527-28.

¹² Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 16, *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George S. Claghorn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 756.

¹³ 'Jonathan Edwards,' 119. 'It was not only Edwards' intellectual might,' concurs Harold Simonson, 'but also his gigantic heart including imagination and vision that enabled him to achieve the rare combination of clarity of thought and depth of insight' (*Jonathan Edwards: Theologian of the Heart* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 85).

¹⁴ Paul Helm writes that Edwards shared with many of his opponents, such as John Taylor, against whom he wrote his treatise on *Original Sin*,





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bowing his rational powers at the foot of God's Word. This is why I say he elevated reason *almost* as high as others. The Word of God always held the last word for him, so that, as John Gerstner put it, 'back to Edwards is back to the Bible.'¹⁵ Edwards was convinced that 'the Word of God should certainly be our rule in matters ... above reason and our own notions.'¹⁶ Yet he did not allow this to excuse him from employing every last ounce of brain power God had given him. We see this balance in his resolutions: 'Resolved, when I think of any theorem in divinity to be solved, immediately to do what I can towards solving it, if circumstances don't hinder' along with '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.'¹⁷ Edwards loved the Bible and he loved to think hard – *in that order*. For him, Scripture 'is the fundamental and primary pillar.'¹⁸ This approach to theology is evident in the title of one of his sermons, as he shows that

'a confidence in human reason. Not because he believed that it was the only reliable source of human knowledge, but because he believed that it was God-given, and that properly used it corroborated and undergirded the teaching of God's special revelation, the Bible.' Helm later comments: 'I suppose that if Edwards had been asked to rank Scripture, reason, and experience in order of importance for theology, he would undoubtedly have ranked Scripture first. But he would have thought that the choice that we were offering him was rather unnecessary, and indeed superficial' ('The Great Christian Doctrine (*Original Sin*),' in John Piper and Justin Taylor, eds., *A God Entranced View of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2004], 177).

¹⁵ John H. Gerstner and Jonathan Neil Gerstner, 'Edwardsean Preparation for Salvation,' *Westminster Theological Journal* 42 (1979): 30.

¹⁶ Jonathan Edwards, in Alexander Grossart, ed., *Selections From the Unpublished Writings of Jonathan Edwards* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria 1992), 43. Reprint from 1865.

¹⁷ *Letters and Personal Writings*, 754, 755. The resolutions are numbers 11 and 28, respectively.

¹⁸ Stephen J. Nichols, *An Absolute Sort of Certainty: The Holy Spirit and the Apologetics of Jonathan Edwards* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian &





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‘A Divine and Supernatural Light’ given to the human heart is ‘both a Scriptural, and Rational Doctrine.’¹⁹ It is this dual (albeit asymmetrical) approach to the theological endeavor which prompted Gerstner to label his three-volume work of Edwards’ theology *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*.²⁰

CAPTIVATED WITH DIVINE MAJESTY

Both of these distinctive character blends – head and heart, reason and revelation – are subsumed under the umbrella of what was said at the start of this introduction. Jonathan Edwards is so needed by the Church in the twenty-first century because of his immense vision of God. He was gripped with the glory of the King of Ages in a way foreign to almost all of us. Again, this does not mean he deserves our attention because he looks down on the rest of us. Rather he is one of the few among us who persistently focused his gaze upward. ‘Edwards’s piety continued on in the revivalist tradition,’ wrote Mark Noll in 1983, ‘his theology continued on in academic Calvinism, but there were no successors to his God-entranced world-view.’²¹

Edwards knew God. He knew God because he had seen God. And what he had seen held him spellbound. We are confronted with the pre-eminence of God at every turn in Edwards’ writings: in human choice, in *Freedom of the Will*;

Reformed, 2003), 131; see also 41-44. One might say, then, that Edwards’ response to the Catholics of his day (who emphasized tradition over the Bible) was that we do not need *more* than Scripture; to the Enthusiasts of his day (who emphasized experience over the Bible), we do not need *less* than Scripture; and to the rationalists of his day (who emphasized reason over the Bible), *we need Scripture*.

¹⁹ *Sermons and Discourses, 1730–1733*, 406.

²⁰ John H. Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (3 vols.; Orlando: Ligonier Ministries, 1991).

²¹ Mark A. Noll, ‘Jonathan Edwards, Moral Philosophy, and the Secularization of American Christian Thought,’ *Reformed Journal* 33/2 (1983): 26.





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in human emotion, in *Religious Affections*; in human history, in *A History of the Work of Redemption*; in human depravity, in *Original Sin*; in human conversion, in *Narrative of Surprising Conversions*; in human morality, in *The Nature of True Virtue*; in human existence, in *The End for Which God Created the World*. All of these – choice, emotion, history, depravity, conversion, morality, even existence itself – are undeniably human realities. But Edwards saw that the God of the Bible precludes them from being only *human* choice, *human* depravity, *human* conversions, *human* morality, *human* emotion, *human* history, or *human* existence. God Himself wisely and mercifully governs each of these – such that human strivings are not emptied of, but energized with, meaning. The Creator stands behind all that happens, whether religious awakenings (Isa. 57:15) or political decisions (Prov. 21:1) or murderous tsunamis (Zech. 10:1) or a game of Monopoly (Prov. 16:33) or the next meal I am about to eat (Ps. 136:25) or the reason you picked up this book today (Prov. 16:9). This theme flavors everything Edwards wrote. *The End for Which God Created the World* is Edwards' most explicit enunciation of this thesis as he shows that one of the implications of God being the center of creation is the recognition that the purpose of everything is to display God's own supreme beauty and worth. Indeed, this treatise 'might be seen as the logical starting point for all of [Edwards'] thinking,' according to Marsden. And this is the heart of Edwards' contribution to a Western world enamored with human exploits and abilities: God is so thoroughly the center of the universe that He lies in, around, under, and above every thought and deed experienced by human beings as well as every seemingly random event of nature. Edwards inhaled Scripture and exhaled theocentrism. 'The key to Edwards' thought,' Marsden reiterates, 'is that everything is related because everything is related to God.'²²





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MOUNT EVEREST

For these reasons at least, when we emerge bleary-eyed from the study, the binders of the two bulky Banner of Truth volumes wearing thin, perhaps we will forgive – or even echo – the audacity of Lloyd-Jones' superlative comparison:

I am tempted, perhaps foolishly, to compare the Puritans to the Alps, Luther and Calvin to the Himalayas, and Jonathan Edwards to Mount Everest! ... There are so many approaches to this great summit; but not only so, the atmosphere is so spiritually rarified, and there is this blazing whiteness of the holiness of the man himself, and his great emphasis upon the holiness and the glory of God; and above all the weakness of the little climber as he faces this great peak pointing up to heaven.²³

The high school literature texts will not tell us that he depicts hell only to woo to heaven. So let us learn, dear fellow climbers, from Jonathan Edwards. His writing is not easy. But it is worth it. The safe consistency of munching coarse grasses in the lowlands may appear to those who do so to outweigh the monotony of so bland a diet; it is only in the mountain passes, however, among the crags and difficult labors of navigation, that one finds the choicest of fruit and flowers – and profits immeasurably thereby.

THE NEED FOR MOTIVATION

The need for the voice of Jonathan Edwards is one of two concerns fueling this book. The other is the need for motivation. It is a centuries-old dilemma:

Close to our vineyard there was a pear tree laden with fruit. This fruit was not enticing, either in appearance

²² Marsden, *Edwards*, 460.

²³ Lloyd-Jones, 'Jonathan Edwards,' 108.





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or in flavor. We nasty lads went there to shake down the fruit and carry it off at dead of night, after prolonging our games out of doors until that late hour according to our abominable custom. We took enormous quantities, not to feast on ourselves but perhaps to throw to the pigs; we did eat a few, *but that was not our motive*: we derived pleasure from the deed simply because it was forbidden.²⁴

So goes the ancient account of the most (in)famous fruit theft in history. Augustine of Hippo, among the Church's greatest thinkers in its two thousand-year history, later reflected on the elusive reasons behind his mischievous act by confessing, 'I feasted on the sin, nothing else, and that I relished and enjoyed.'²⁵ Thus one man's struggle with moral motivation. It is a problem that can be traced back to the hearts of a married couple in a tranquil Garden (Gen. 3:6) and forward to the heart of any person honest and brave enough to admit the inability to live for any length of time without straying from God's will.

There is hardly a more pressing subject for the people of God to consider than motivation. It is not peripheral. The question of why we obey God pervades the daily lives of followers of Jesus Christ. Why pursue holiness? If we are to possess and exemplify authentic Christianity, it is crucial to understand not only *that* we ought to follow God's commands but *why* we do so. For is this not the difficulty? Our failures lie not in ignorance. We know how to honor God. The Bible tells us – adequately, if not exhaustively. The problem is that, once knowing, we fail to *want* to do it. As Augustine once mused, 'The intellect flies ahead, but weak human feelings follow tardily, if at all.'²⁶

²⁴ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 30. Emphasis added.

²⁵ Ibid, 32.

²⁶ *The Works of Saint Augustine, Vol. 19: Expositions of the Psalms, 99-120*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. Maria Boulding (New York: New City, 2003), 376.





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The issue is motivation. And it lies at the root of any relationship's vitality. Lackluster at best will be the marriage in which the wife acts lovingly toward her husband even as she wonders why she does it. The son who constantly but fruitlessly examines his heart for reasons to obey his parents will soon give up the task of obedience, even if he has a vague intuition that he ought to submit. Begrudging obedience is miserable. The human will is a strong force when driven with purpose. Without it, though, the most likely results of our attempts to live uprightly are bitterness and frustration.

Motivation is essential to authentic Christian living.

THE PATH BEFORE US

Out of these two great needs, then – our need to learn from Jonathan Edwards and our need for motivation – this book is born. Our aim is to ask what America's theologian has to say on the subject of Christian motivation.

Before delving into Edwards himself, we will begin with a brief overview of various classes into which motivation can be divided. Drawing insights from various writers, we will identify three basic categories in which believers are motivated to obey God with respect to the past, the present,

The comment is on Ps. 119:20. Thomas Aquinas quotes this statement of Augustine's and deals with it at length in his *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947-48), 1:628-33. In another place Augustine writes of believers that God 'grants them both to know what they should do and to do what they know' ('The Grace of Christ and Original Sin,' in *The Works of Saint Augustine, Vol. 23: Answer to the Pelagians*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Roland J. Teske [New York: New City, 1997], 410).

Augustine and Edwards, on the one hand, and Socrates, on the other, are diametrically opposed in their understanding of ethics and motivation if Everett Ferguson is right: 'Socrates' basic idea was that if you know what is right, you will do it. Wrongdoing is the result of wrong thinking and wrong information' (*Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 329).





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and the future. Though these categories are not air-tight and room must be left to accommodate overlap, for clarity's sake we will label them gratitude, identity, and personal benefit. They will be taken in this order, each section concluding with a few Scripture passages which implement that particular avenue of motivation. This will lead to an examination of a handful of pertinent sermons and other works by Edwards. At the end we'll tie it all together before drawing out some implications.

AUTHENTIC OBEDIENCE

One final note – a point absolutely critical to everything that follows. Reference will be made repeatedly to 'obedience' throughout this book. Unless otherwise indicated, this refers to *authentic* obedience: that is, obedience which is from the heart. It is simplistic to see only two possibilities regarding faithfulness to God: disobedience and obedience. Rather, three options are before us: disobedience, authentic obedience and inauthentic obedience. Disobedience refers, of course, to rejection of the imperatives of God. Inauthentic obedience is a bit more slippery. It is obedience driven by something other than the heartfelt love for God and his glory that characterizes authentic obedience. Legalism, for example, sees obedience as a cause of fellowship with God rather than its result. Such 'obedience' is in fact disobedience, since God demands not only that we obey but that we do it for the right reasons (Deut. 28:47; Prov. 16:2; 1 Cor. 4:5). So there is not only an external (the act of obedience) but an internal (the motivation) element to godly living. We find ourselves, then, not with two kinds of obedience and one kind of disobedience. Rather there are actually two brands of disobedience – one involving open disobedience and one involving apparent obedience accompanied by impure motives – and only one true obedience. It is the latter we are after here.





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How, then, does this authentic obedience come about?
The answer to that question is the reason for this book.





The LORD searches all hearts and understands
every plan and thought.

1 Chronicles 28:9

All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes,
but the LORD weighs the spirit.

Proverbs 16:2

He will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness
and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

1 Corinthians 4:5

