



The Life of

David Brainerd

A D E V O T I O N A L

JOE TYRPAK

The Life of David Brainerd: A Devotional

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Jonathan Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*. Edited by Norman Pettit.
Volume 7. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

To Karis, Tori, Jordan & Vera,

May the Lord bless and protect you.

*May the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you—
pouring out on you his saving grace in Christ and his all-sufficient grace for life.*

*May the Lord smile on you and give you peace—
giving you peace with God through Jesus and the peace of God that surpasses all comprehension.*

*May his grace and peace be yours in abundance—
trumping all the shortcomings of your daddy.*

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INTRODUCTION

Should I Consider David Brainerd an Example of Biblical Spirituality?

SEVEN REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD CONSIDER DAVID BRAINERD
AN EXAMPLE OF BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY
(EVEN THOUGH HE STRUGGLED WITH DEEP DEPRESSION)

You should read *The Life of David Brainerd*. If you've never heard of it, then let me introduce it to you.

The Life of David Brainerd is a classic work on evangelical spirituality. It's a book that hasn't gone out of print for three centuries. It's the most popular book ever published by Jonathan Edwards, America's greatest theologian. However, Edwards' depiction of Brainerd is less Jonathan's biography and more David's autobiography because it's primarily comprised of Brainerd's own writings, including both his private diaries and some of his missionary reports.

David Brainerd (1718–47) was a physically infirm, single man who gave four years of his brief life to evangelizing Native Americans in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey (1743–46). He died while being cared for in the Edwards' home. Jonathan's account of David's life transparently reveals Brainerd's personal struggles as well as his missionary success. While it records some of his "ups," it reveals a lot of his "downs"—his deep struggles with depression. That's a quick introduction to David Brainerd.

*"I am far from
supposing that
Mr. Brainerd's
inward exercises
were free from
imperfection."*

—
JONATHAN EDWARDS

Many people, however, need no introduction to Brainerd. They know who he is, they know his autobiography is a classic, and they've even started to read it. But many readers throw in the towel soon after starting. They get a few dozen pages into the book and become overwhelmed with his incessant self-loathing.

If that's you—if you've tried to read *The Life of David Brainerd* and given up after a few pages—then my goal in this introduction is to encourage you to pick it up again. Here are seven reasons to consider (or maybe reconsider) David Brainerd to be a beneficial example.

First, you should consider Brainerd a model of biblical spirituality because Edwards knew he was depressed yet still published his biography. In his preface Jonathan Edwards wrote,

I am far from supposing that Mr. Brainerd's inward exercises . . . were free from imperfection: The example of Jesus Christ is the only example that ever was set in the human nature, that was altogether perfect; which therefore is a rule to try all other examples by. . . . There is one thing in Mr. Brainerd, easily discernable by the following account of his life, which though not properly an imperfection of a moral nature, yet may possibly be made an objection against the extraordinary appearances of religion and devotion in him . . . and that is, that he was one who by his constitution and natural temper was so prone to melancholy and dejection of spirit (p. 91).

In other words, by publishing *The Life of David Brainerd*, Edwards wasn't endorsing his depression. He was just presenting Brainerd as he truly was: a man, like all of us, whose greatest strengths (e.g., spiritual sensitivity) were his greatest weaknesses (e.g., introspection and spiritual depression).

Second, you should consider Brainerd a model of biblical spirituality because, to some degree, depression was the goal of Brainerd's private diary. There is a night-and-day difference between his diary and his journal which suggests that Brainerd didn't think of his diary as a daily list of activities. Rather, his diary was a very personal record of his spiritual struggles, of his grief over sin, and of his continual need to grow in Christlikeness (all of which we'd expect to be depressing). There are many Christians who (like David) are introspective to an unhealthy degree. Yet, in my experience, most of us err on the side of too little introspection. The fact that Brainerd's diary seems gloomy may actually indicate more about ourselves than about him. We may have a more positive outlook than he did, not because we're more godly, but because we live in regular unawareness of our spiritual neediness.

Third, you should consider Brainerd a model of biblical spirituality because Brainerd's depression is not as bad as most people caricaturize it to be. From a cursory reading, many people jump to the conclusion that David was a mental case. Now, I think that he too frequently took strange delight in his melancholy, but Brainerd's diary doesn't portray an emotionally sick man. Although Brainerd regularly spoke of his depression, it doesn't seem to have altered his ministry activity. Although he often longed for heaven, he was never suicidal. And even though he regularly grieved over his sinfulness, he never seemed to doubt his security in Christ. Jonathan Edwards knew David personally. David lived in the Edwards' home for the last five months

of his life, and Edwards didn't describe him as an insecure lunatic. He said that David was "remarkably sociable, pleasant, and entertaining in his conversation; yet solid, savory, spiritual, and very profitable; appearing meek, modest, and humble; far from any stiffness [or] moroseness . . ." (p. 445).

Fourth, you should consider Brainerd a model of biblical spirituality because a certain kind of depression is inescapable for those "who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:12). For believers on this side of glory—believers who are in touch with "the sufferings of this present time," "inward groaning" is not only understandable but inescapable (Romans 8:18–23). If you, like David Brainerd, are living with your eyes open, then you're constantly experiencing and encountering all kinds of suffering—sickness and death, oppression and Satanic attacks, temptations and failures, sad divisions among believers, and regular rejection of the gospel by unbelievers. These realities leave sensitive believers with "great sorrow and unceasing anguish [of] heart" (Romans 9:2), so that we cry, "How long, O Lord?" And these realities will often compel us to ask ourselves, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?" (Psalm 42:5, 11; 43:5). David's diaries are no more morose than Psalms of lament.

Fifth, you should consider Brainerd a model of biblical spirituality because depression is common among exemplary believers. Whether you look in church history (e.g., Bunyan and Spurgeon) or in biblical history (e.g., Elijah and Paul), many exemplary believers struggled with depression. But depressed Christians are not only encountered in books. I can almost guarantee that several believers in your congregation struggle with depression, including some of those who are strongest. You may or may not struggle with depression, but many of your brothers and sisters do. Reading Brainerd will help you to empathize with them and not immediately write them off as unspiritual weaklings. You may be surprised to find out that some of your leaders, including your pastors and missionaries, consistently struggle with depression. Why have so many pastors and missionaries considered *The Life of David Brainerd* to be an invaluable resource? No doubt, the reason is because they can relate to him. Reading Brainerd will help you to understand these believers, relate to them, talk with them, and pray for them.

Sixth, you should consider Brainerd a model of biblical spirituality because you'll have a friend to walk with you through valleys. Every believer has experienced or will experience seasons of spiritual discouragement, of painful awareness of indwelling sin, of prolonged physical sickness that has undetectable but obvious spiritual side effects, of apparent fruitlessness in ministry, and of unsatisfied cravings for Christlikeness and Christ's presence. When you endure such agonizing seasons, Brainerd will remind you that you're not alone.

Seventh, you should consider Brainerd a model of biblical spirituality because he's "Clay Pot: Exhibit A." All ministry for Christ is designed by God to look like the Savior on the cross: apparent human weakness as the conduit for God's saving power. Paul wrote, "We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Corinthians 4:7). It's obvious from reading *The Life of David Brainerd* that David was an unimpressive clay pot. Yet, seeing all of his weakness should encourage you that God uses weak things to accomplish His purposes (1 Corinthians 1:27). In fact, God's mode of operation is to *highlight* our weaknesses so that His power appears all the more glorious (2 Corinthians 12:9). So, Brainerd's obviously feeble example should inspire us with hope that God could bless our frail and flawed attempts to advance the gospel.

If you're one of those individuals who's tried to read *The Life of David Brainerd* but then put it down because of its gloominess, I hope I've encouraged you to pick it up again. But even if you don't, I hope that I've given you solid reasons to rethink your initial assesment and to consider that someone who struggles with depression might be a valuable illustration of biblical spirituality.

In the pages that follow, I briefly explain seven ways that David Brainerd's helpful (not perfect) example should challenge our understanding and practice of biblical spirituality. I hope it's clear that my primary focus is to encourage *biblical* spirituality, not "Brainerdian spirituality." I'm *not* saying, "Imitate David Brainerd," but rather, "Imitate David Brainerd insofar as he imitates Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1).

This booklet is not meant to be read in one sitting but rather in seven or more sittings. Try not to rush. Instead, take time to consider how the biblical truth and biographical history of each article relates to your experience. Each chapter concludes with a practical journaling recommendation, so I encourage you to get a journal in which to write throughout this seven-part study. If you're not in the habit of journaling, then consider testing its value. Jonathan Edwards' modeled the habit of always "study[ing] *with his pen in his hand*" (Sereno Dwight, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 1*, p. xviii, italics original). He along with countless other Christians have found that journaling helps with focused, clear, and deep thinking. Journaling helps with thinking, *period*.

Now concerning [spirituality], brothers,
I do not want you to be uninformed.

I CORINTHIANS 12:1

I .

SPIRITUALITY

What is Spirituality According to the Bible?

MANIFESTING JESUS' LIKENESS IN YOUR LOVE

Spirituality has been a buzzword for the past generation. Over the past twenty years or so, tens of millions of people have preferred to describe themselves as “spiritual, but not religious,” by which they mean something like, “I have private religious beliefs and practices, but I don’t necessarily align with any historic teaching, nor do I regularly gather with any religious group.”

Take, for example, Kerry Kennedy’s 2008 *New York Times* best seller, *Being Catholic Now*. She asks forty prominent Roman Catholic Americans, “What does being Catholic mean to you?” The answers are all across the spectrum, reflecting beliefs of conservative Catholics to cynical atheists. Her introduction ends with the following observation:

Generations ago, the search for spirituality came predefined and prepackaged. The Baltimore Catechism not only gave us all the answers, it even gave us the questions to ask. Now all that packaging has been subjected to criticism and has been found wanting. Religion today is at a time of enormous change. . . . We’re all in a boat that has been rocked. Everyone is struggling to find the proper balance; for comfort, for truth (pp. xvi–xvii).

In essence Kennedy says, “The Church used to tell us how to think and what to believe. Now we’re trying to figure it out on our own, and we’re struggling to strike the balance between what’s true and what we’re comfortable believing.” While this individualistic and eclectic approach is quite common in most faith traditions, including evangelical Christianity, it’s faulty at the foundation.

The “spiritual, but not religious” mindset is flawed because truth isn’t negotiable. Something doesn’t become true when we choose to believe it. Something that’s true is true whether I’m comfortable with it or not. So if

something is true, I need to acknowledge it, adjust my thinking, and live accordingly.

The “spiritual, but not religious” viewpoint is also problematic because Christian spirituality can’t be divorced from the Christian religion. Spirituality is, according to Glen Scorgie, “the domain of lived Christian experience. It is about living all of life—not just some esoteric portion of it—before God, through Christ, in the transforming and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit” (*Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, p. 27). In other words, spirituality refers to a person’s outworking of his or her religious beliefs. It’s how your faith affects your life—what your relationship with God looks like 24/7. Religion and spirituality can’t be separated.

The subject of spirituality can be studied both theologically and practically. To use an illustration, you can examine both the doctrinal *roots* of spirituality as well as the *fruits* of spiritual discipline. Further, both of those aspects should be studied from both *biblical* and *historical* perspectives.

Study Spirituality Biblically

In the New Testament’s most direct and sustained teaching on spirituality (on “things pertaining to the Spirit,” 1 Corinthians 12:1), Paul explains that spirituality is not necessarily manifest in remarkable ministry abilities, vast biblical knowledge, or generous giving (1 Corinthians 13:1–3). Rather,

*“There are
two ways of
recommending
true religion to
the world: one
is by doctrine;
the other is
by example.”*

the Holy Spirit’s authentic work is evident when people confess Jesus as Lord (1 Corinthians 12:3) and display consistent Christlike love toward the hard-to-love believers around them (1 Corinthians 13:4–7). In a word, spirituality is *love*. True spirituality is evident when a believer loves *Christ* and loves others *like Christ*. That’s unsurprising. After all, the Holy Spirit’s central mission is to glorify Jesus Christ in the mind and life of every disciple (John 16:13–14). So, true spirituality, according to 1 Corinthians 13, reveals itself in very normal, non-flashy ways: in self-forgetful humility, in long-fused patience, and in unresentful kindness.

No matter where you turn in the New Testament letters, you’ll find spirituality defined in basically the same way—as humble, forgiving, patient, Christlike love. Look at John 13 where Jesus vividly teaches his disciples that servant-minded love (modeled after the love of *the* Servant) would be their identifying characteristic. Or look

about a humble, cheerful, love for God and growth in holiness that lasts a lifetime. Edwards confronts us once again with a high vision of the Christian calling that was perhaps the chief glory of Puritanism, a vision that challenges the carnal and emaciated “Christian” living that is so common in our churches today. We think we have rediscovered the work of the Spirit if we experience warm fuzzy feelings while singing, or see spectacular answers to our prayers (*The Devoted Life*, edited by Kelly M. Kopic and Randall C. Gleason, p. 296).

Do you see, from this brief glimpse of the Bible and from this snippet of church history, the true nature of biblical spirituality? It’s genuineness is evident not in rapturous feelings of love but in habitual expressions of love. While the Holy Spirit’s work is a very personal thing, it can’t be privatized. Spirituality cannot evidence itself apart from relationships—a vital relationship with Jesus Christ himself and harmonious relationships with Christians, especially Christians who provoke you to anger (otherwise, there’s no need to show patience and forbearance). Genuine spirituality is evident in your love for the Lord Jesus Christ and for his people. Is it possible that you have allowed false guages of spirituality to infect your thinking? Might your view of spirituality need biblical adjustment?

JOURNALING PROJECT #1

1. Open to one of the passages of Scripture mentioned in this article (i.e., 1 Corinthians 13, John 13, Galatians 5, Romans 12–13, Ephesians 4–6, Titus 2, James 3–4, 1 John 4). As you read the passage, write in your journal a list of at least five attributes of Spirit-produced love.
2. When you finish your list, write out your own one-sentence definition of *spirituality* based on that passage.
3. Then, go back through each attribute of love in your list and identify at least one recent shortcoming in your own life in each area.
4. After identifying a few ways in which your love needs to grow, confess your sins to the Lord and beg him to help you grow.