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## DAVID BRAINERD: “A CONSTANT STREAM”

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On October 9, 1747, in Jonathan Edwards’s home in Northampton, Massachusetts, David Brainerd died. In what Edwards saw as a singular act of God’s providence, Brainerd has been persuaded by friends not to destroy his personal papers. Instead, he had put them in Edwards’s hands to dispose of as “would be most for God’s glory and the interest of religion.”<sup>1</sup>

The most valuable of these papers was Brainerd’s diary; it was this which formed the basis for Edwards’s life of Brainerd published in 1749 with the title *An Account of the Life of the late Rev. David Brainerd*. Most of Edwards’s account consists of quotations from Brainerd’s diary. (Brainerd’s *Journal* was not included in Edwards’s first edition of 1749, but was added in the Edinburgh edition of 1765 and in many later editions.) Edwards adds a preface, summary paragraphs and, from time to time, explanatory notes. Edwards’s own contribution is much more substantial during the account of the last six months of Brainerd’s life, when the young missionary lived in Edwards’s home.

A charming feature of this book is the glimpse one sees of Jonathan Edwards’s feelings towards Brainerd. He acknowledges with thankfulness “the gracious dispensation of providence to me and my family, in so ordering it that he should be brought to my house in his last sickness...so that we had opportunity for much acquaintance and conversation with him...” (p. 316).

Neither Brainerd’s diary nor Edwards’s account is strictly speaking a biography. The historical framework is supplied — sometimes by Brainerd, more often by Edwards — but serves principally as a structure for Brainerd’s spiritual experiences. Often we do not know where Brainerd is nor what he is doing, but we always know how it stands between his soul and God.

David Brainerd was born on April 20, 1718, at Haddam, Connecticut. As a young man, he had, as he says, “a very good outside” (p. 4). After a time of a “distressed, bewildered, and tumultuous state of mind” (p. 8) and rebellion against God’s law and sovereignty, Brainerd, at about twenty years of age, had a new vision of God’s glory: “My soul was so captivated and delighted with the excellence, loveliness, greatness...of God that I had no thought...at first, about my own salvation, and scarce reflected that there was such a creature as myself” (p. 14).

In September 1739 he entered Yale College. Academic ambition dulled his

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<sup>1</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *The Life of the Rev. David Brainerd* (London: Burton and Smith, 1818), xv. The page references in the text of this article are to this edition of *The Life of David Brainerd*.

spiritual life until he was caught up in "a great and general awakening" which spread through the college in February 1741. Brainerd, writes Edwards, experienced "much of God's gracious presence, and of the lively actions of true grace" (p. 18) but also was influenced by that "intemperate, indiscreet zeal, which was at that time too prevalent" (p. 20). Brainerd's criticism of one of the college tutors ("He has no more grace than this chair") led to his expulsion from Yale in the winter of 1741-42. He deeply regretted his mistakes, often sought reconciliation with the college leaders and, to the end of his life, warned against false enthusiasm and misguided zeal in religion.

In the spring of 1742, while he was preparing to become a pastor, Brainerd experienced a strong desire that God use him in the work of missions "to the heathen" (p. 22). His lifelong missionary commitment is expressed in these words written in 1746:

Here I am, Lord, send me; send me to the ends of the earth; send me to the rough, the savage pagans of the wilderness; send me from all that is called comfort on earth; send me even to death itself, if it be but in thy service, and to promote thy kingdom (pp. 184, 185).

On November 25 Brainerd was examined in New York by the Correspondents of the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge and appointed as their missionary to the Indians. His first assignment was at Kaunameek, a place in New York between Stockbridge and Albany — described by Brainerd as "the most lonesome wilderness" (p. 71). He slept on a bundle of straw, ate boiled corn and hasty pudding, and faced the animosity of the local Dutch, who coveted the Indians' land.

In April 1744 most of the Indians moved to Stockbridge, and the Society assigned him a new mission to the Delaware Indians in Pennsylvania. Brainerd preached to the Indians, defended them against those who tried to cheat them, and attempted to secure for them good land and a decent living. Edwards notes that Brainerd was active "in humanizing, civilizing and wonderfully reforming and transforming some of the most brutish savages" (p. 297). He wrote in his diary on June 25: "To an eye of reason everything respecting the conversion of the Heathen is as dark as midnight; yet I cannot but hope in God for the accomplishment of something glorious among them" (p. 115). In October he made the first of a number of trips to preach to the Indians who lived along the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania.

Brainerd had been licensed by a Congregational association on July 29, 1742. He was ordained two years later by the Presbytery of New York. He wrote in his diary: "Oh that I might always be engaged in his service, duly remembering the solemn charge I have received, in the presence of God, angels, and men. Amen" (p. 114).

In the summer of 1745 Brainerd moved to New Jersey to preach to the Indians at Crosweeksung near Freehold. It was during this period that a sudden

and sovereign outpouring of God's Spirit brought surprising success to Brainerd's mission, leading to seventy-seven baptisms in less than a year. This "remarkable work of grace" (p. 157) exactly fitted the pattern that Edwards believed God would use in converting the nations.

Brainerd's sick body, weakened by inadequate shelter and food and stricken with tuberculosis, began to fight its last battle. In May 1746 the Indians moved to Cranberry, where Brainerd hoped God would settle them "as a Christian congregation" (p. 180). It was not easy for him to settle with them. It was, he wrote in his diary on May 16, "very difficult, and contrary to my fixed intention for years past...to go forth and spend my life in preaching the gospel from place to place, and gathering souls afar off to Jesus the great Redeemer..." (p. 182). A final trip to the Susquehanna in August 1746 was interrupted by illness, and Brainerd returned home to Cranberry, doubting his recovery but "little exercised with melancholy, as in former seasons of weakness" (p. 207). He continued to work and preach, sometimes from his bed, rejoicing that life and death did not depend upon his choice.

In November 1746 he left for New England but was forced by sickness to remain in Elizabeth-Town until March 1747, when he visited his congregation of Indians for the last time. On March 18 he wrote: "About ten o'clock, I called my people together; and after having explained and sung a psalm, I prayed with them. There was a considerable degree of affection among them; I doubt not, in some instances, that which was more than merely natural" (p. 217). After seeing his brother John examined and appointed as his successor in the mission at Cranberry, David left New Jersey for the last time.

He visited several places in New England and on May 28, 1747, came to Northampton. Here he was told by the doctor that his illness was terminal, but, says Edwards, "it seemed not to occasion the least discomposure in him, nor to make any manner of alteration as to the cheerfulness and serenity of his mind, or the freedom and pleasantness of his conversation" (p. 223). Advised by physicians to continue traveling to try to prolong his life, Brainerd set out for Boston accompanied by Edwards's daughter, seventeen-year-old Jerusha, who had become his nurse and fiancée. He became very ill in Boston, but was able to talk with visitors, especially on the difference between true and false religion, and to advise the Commissioners in Boston of the Society in London for Propagating the Gospel in New England about a mission to the Six Nations. His presence in Boston stirred interest in missions to the Indians and resulted in a number of gifts for his work.

On July 20, David, his brother Israel, who was a student at Yale, and Jerusha Edwards left Boston, arriving at Northampton on July 25. Edwards carefully records the final days of Brainerd's life, noting such things as the last time he attended public worship and the last time he offered the family prayer. Brainerd corrected some of his private writings, wrote letters, and gave counsel to those about him, particularly to Edwards's children and ser-

vants. "He spoke to some of my younger children," writes Edwards, "one by one" (p. 242). He assured Jerusha that they would "spend a happy eternity together" (p. 250). (She also became infected with tuberculosis and died four months after Brainerd.) He discussed the importance of the work of the ministry with a neighboring minister and talked with his brother John about his congregation in New Jersey. When someone came into his room with a Bible, Brainerd said: "Oh that dear book: that lovely book! I shall soon see it opened: the mysteries that are in it, and the mysteries of God's providence, will all be unfolded" (p. 251). On October 9, 1747, David Brainerd — not yet thirty years old — died; his soul, says Jonathan Edwards, "as we may well conclude, was received by his dear Lord and Master, as an eminently faithful servant, into that state of perfection and fruition of God, which he had so often and so ardently longed for; and was welcomed by the glorious assembly in the upper world, as one peculiarly fitted to join them in their blessed employments and enjoyments" (p. 252).

Edwards's life of David Brainerd begins with a classic sentence: "There are two ways of representing and recommending true religion and virtue to the world...the one is by doctrine and precept, the other is by instance and example" (v). Edwards had already dealt with the problem of true and false religion doctrinally in *The Distinguishing Marks of the Work of the Spirit of God* (1741) and *The Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746). Now he presents Brainerd's life as "a remarkable instance of true and eminent piety, in heart and practice" (xv).

Edwards sees in Brainerd a combination of "what was natural, with that which was spiritual...as it evermore is in the best saints in this world" (xiv). There were "natural" qualities about David Brainerd which appealed to Jonathan Edwards. Edwards found the young man who was dying in his home "remarkably sociable, pleasant and entertaining in his conversation; yet solid, savoury, spiritual and very profitable; appearing meek, modest and humble, far from any stiffness, moroseness, superstitious demureness, or affected singularity in speech or behaviour" (p. 222). Brainerd had numerous friends, was loved by the Indians, and was, even in the great suffering of his last illness, thoughtful and kind.

Brainerd was, however, often plagued by extreme melancholy and depression. Edwards notes this tendency as an imperfection in Brainerd's character (vii) and Brainerd himself found it to be "a great hindrance to spiritual fervency" (p. 103). Brainerd struggled against his dark nights of the soul with increasing success. He came to see his ardent desires to die as "expressions of impatience" (p. 67). On July 10, 1746, he wrote: "My heart was dead to all below, not through dejection, as at some times, but from views of a better inheritance" (p. 192). Edwards faults Brainerd for "being excessive in his labours, not taking due care of his strength" (xiii). Brainerd came to see that it was necessary to spend some time in recreation in order to be better able to serve God. These "diversions" once were "my all," Brainerd wrote; "now

they are only means leading to my all” (p. 152).

Brainerd also struggled with loneliness. He knew that solitude aggravated his trials but it was better, he thought, than to be “incumbered with noise and tumult” (p. 80). Edwards, however, makes the practical suggestion that it would be better to send out two missionaries to serve together.

The “spiritual” qualities of David Brainerd were impressive to Edwards, as they are to all readers of Brainerd’s life. He had a deep and continuing sense of sin and his own unworthiness. He once wrote: “I am all sin; I cannot think nor act, but every motion is sin” (p. 27). During a dangerous journey along the Susquehanna River, Brainerd wrote: “I was afraid of nothing but sin, and afraid of that in every action and thought” (p. 131). He confessed specific sins. He wrote: “The sins I most lamented of were pride and wandering thoughts, whereby I mocked God” (p. 138). Brainerd’s acute sensitivity to his sin never caused him to doubt, however, the power of God’s grace in saving and keeping him.

Brainerd’s great passion was for holiness of life. “If I cannot be holy,” he wrote, “I must necessarily be miserable forever” (p. 77). To further this goal he sought to free himself from earthly things. He wrote: “My soul longs to feel itself more of a pilgrim and stranger here below; that nothing may divert me from pressing through the lonely desert, till I arrive at my Father’s house” (p. 39). He prayed: “May I never loiter in my heavenly journey” (p. 51).

There was an asceticism in Brainerd; but, like the best of those who are called to poverty, his motivation was service. He wrote: “I had as quick and lively a sense of the value of worldly comforts as ever I had; but saw them infinitely overmatched by the worth of Christ’s kingdom and the propagation of his blessed gospel” (p. 185). He wrote also: “All I want respecting this life is, such circumstances as may best capacitate me to do service for God in the world” (p. 182). Brainerd gladly accepted his call to a wandering ministry to the Indians; and though he was “destitute of house and home, and many comforts of life,” he was happy to see others enjoy their good gifts (p. 184).

Diligence and fervency in prayer characterize Brainerd’s piety. Many entries in his diary read like the one on April 19, 1742: “God enabled me so to agonize in prayer, that I was quite wet with perspiration” (p. 27). Brainerd’s prayers were filled with concern for the spread of the gospel. Edwards described Brainerd’s last days on earth: “In his prayers, he dwelt much on the prosperity of Zion, the advancement of Christ’s kingdom in the world, and the propagation of religion among the Indians” (p. 223). Brainerd’s example in prayer for the “enlargement of the kingdom of Christ in the world” gave Jonathan Edwards “great hope” (p. 308).

Edwards saw Brainerd’s life not only as a challenge to real piety but also as an example of true theology. Brainerd’s religion was not marked by what was then called “enthusiasm” — a type of piety which depended on immediate intuitions and experiences of the Holy Spirit. Brainerd condemned the reli-

gion of the "high pretenders" and "professors of extra-ordinary spiritual experience" (p. 286). He questioned a faith which produced only "elevated joys and affections" and which emphasized the subjective experience of possessing Christ rather than "deep humility, brokenness of heart, and an abasing sense of barrenness" (p. 222). He abhorred "noise and show in religion" (p. 234).

Brainerd's faith was steady, rather than flashy. It was not, writes Edwards, "like a land-flood, which flows far and wide and with a rapid stream bearing down all before it, and then dried up; but more like a stream fed by living springs; which though sometimes increased by showers, and at other times diminished by drought, yet is a constant stream" (p. 285).

Brainerd's faith was God-centered rather than self-centered. According to Edwards, Brainerd's "love to God was primarily and principally for the supreme excellency of his own nature...so his joy was joy in God, and not in himself" (p. 281). As he was dying, Brainerd "longed for heaven as a state wherein I might glorify him perfectly, rather than as a place of happiness for myself" (p. 227).

Theologically, Brainerd was committed, as Edwards writes, to "what is called the Calvinistical scheme" (p. 301). Brainerd's Calvinism stressed holiness of life. A few months before he died, Brainerd summed up the content of his ministry: "The great doctrines of regeneration, the new creature, faith in Christ, progressive sanctification, supreme love to God, living entirely to the glory of God, being not our own, and the like" (p. 221). In his final illness Brainerd was impressed with "the truth of those great doctrines, which are justly stiled [sic] the doctrines of grace" and the fact that "the essence of religion consisted in the soul's conformity to God" (p. 225).

A committed Calvinist, Brainerd, however, "abhorred the very thought of a party in religion" and wrote: "Let the truth of God appear, wherever it is; and God have the glory forever" (p. 78). Brainerd later wrote: "Through divine goodness, I have been enabled to...let all men, and all denominations of men alone, as to their party-notions; and only preached the plain and necessary truths of Christianity" (p. 173).

*An Account of the Life of the late Rev. David Brainerd* had enormous popularity and influence. Over thirty different editions appeared by the end of the nineteenth century, making it the most frequently reprinted of all Edwards's works. It was the first biography written in America that achieved wide notice abroad as well as at home. (It was published in Dutch in 1756, French in 1838, and German in 1851.) It quickly became a classic of devotional literature. As Edwards foresaw, many readers found in David Brainerd a challenge to personal holiness.

Edwards also saw David Brainerd as a great and inspiring example to ministers. His life "shows the right way to success in the work of the ministry" and "his example of labouring, praying, denying himself, and enduring hardness, with unfainting resolution and patience, and his faithful,

vigilant, and prudent conduct in many other respects...may afford instruction to missionaries in particular” (p. 306).

Brainerd’s missionary career spanned less than five years, but Edwards’s life of Brainerd revealed a missionary hero whose impact was astounding. Archibald Alexander said that a missionary spirit was enkindled in the New Side Presbyterian Church as a result of the publication of Brainerd’s journal. It made a significant contribution to the new era of missionary labor which sent British and American Christians to many parts of the world in the early nineteenth century. Missionary leaders significantly influenced by Brainerd’s life include William Carey; Thomas Coke, the early Methodist missionary leader; Robert Morrison, Bible translator in China; Samuel Marsden, missionary to the Maories in New Zealand; Samuel Mills, the “founder” of American foreign missions; Henry Martyn, who became another source of missionary inspiration through his own journal; and Thomas Chalmers, missionary leader in the Church of Scotland. Carey, Ward, and Marshman — colleagues in the Serampore Mission in India — affirmed a covenant three times a year, which included the following statement: “Let us often look at Brainerd, ...in the woods of America pouring out his very soul before God for the people. Prayer, secret, fervent, expectant, lies at the root of all personal godliness.”

On February 4, 1744, David Brainerd wrote in his diary: “Sanctification in myself, and the ingathering of God’s elect, was all my desire; and the hope of its accomplishment, all my joy” (p. 99). After almost two and a half centuries, Edwards’s *Life of Brainerd* still challenges us to greater love for God and commitment to his missionary purposes. The “constant stream” flows on.