

# David Brainerd

May I Never Loiter On My Heavenly Journey!

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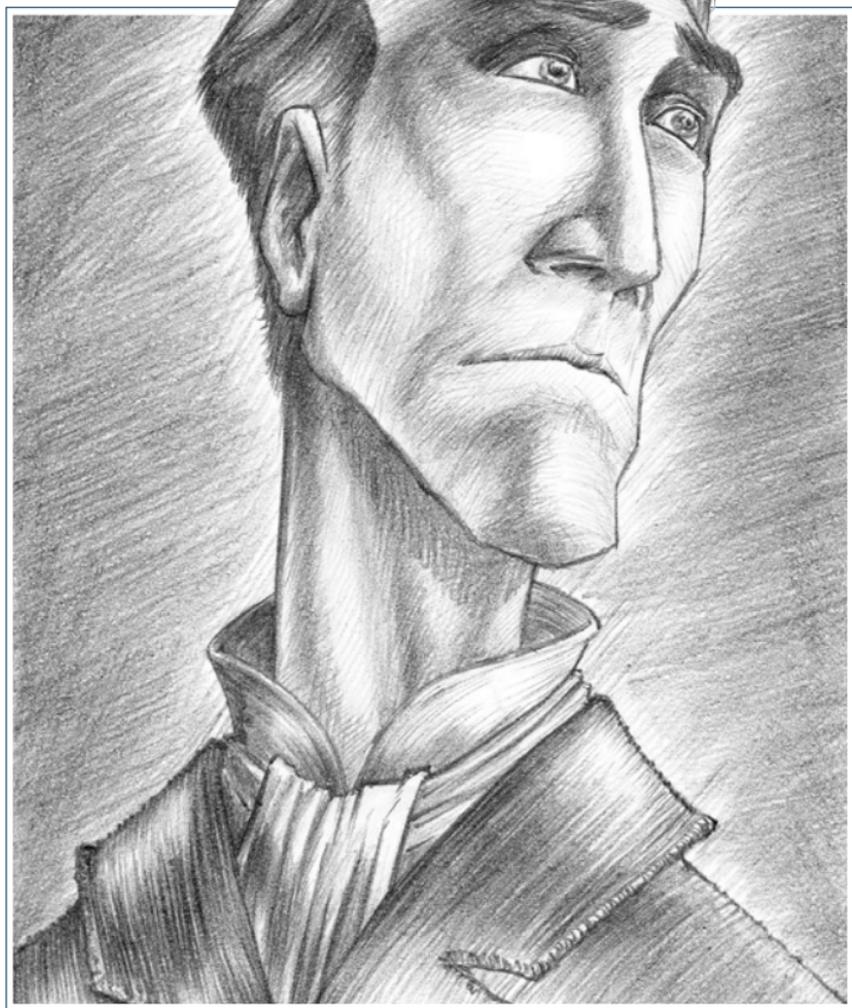
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David Brainerd was born on April 20, 1718 in Haddam, Connecticut. That year John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards turned 14. Benjamin Franklin turned 12 and George Whitefield 3. The Great Awakening was just over the horizon and Brainerd would live through both waves of it in the mid thirties and early forties, then die of tuberculosis in Jonathan Edwards' house at the age of 29 on October 9, 1747.

### **A Unique Family**

Brainerd's father Hezekiah was a Connecticut legislator and died when David was nine year's old. Judging by own experience as a son and as a father, I think that may have been the hardest year of all. He had been a rigorous Puritan with strong views of authority and strictness at home; and he pursued a very earnest devotion that included days of private fasting to promote spiritual welfare.<sup>1</sup>

Brainerd was the sixth child and third son born to Hezekiah and Dorothy. After him came three more children. Dorothy had brought one little boy from a previous marriage, and so there were twelve of them in the home—but not for long. Five years after his father died at the age of 46, his mother died when he was 14.

It seems that there was an unusual strain of weakness and depression in the family. Not only did the parents die early, David's brother Nehemiah died at 32, his brother Israel died at 23, his sister Jerusha died at 34, and he died at 29. In 1865 a descendant, Thomas Brainerd (in a biography of John Brainerd), said, "In the whole Brainerd family for two hundred years there has been a tendency to a morbid depression, akin to hypochondria (64)."

So on top of having an austere father, and suffering the loss of both parents as a sensitive child, he probably inherited some kind of tendency of depression. Whatever the cause, he suffered from the blackest dejection off and on throughout his short life. He says at the very beginning of his diary, “I was, I think, from my youth something sober and inclined rather to melancholy than the other extreme (101).”

### **The Quarrel With God In His Soul**

When his mother died he moved across the Connecticut River to East Haddam to live with his married sister, Jerusha. He described his religion during these years as very careful and serious, but having no true grace. When he turned 19 he inherited a farm and moved for a year a few miles west to Durham to try his hand at farming. But his heart was not in it. He longed for “a liberal education.” (103) In fact Brainerd was a contemplative and a scholar from head to toe. If he hadn’t been expelled from Yale, he may well have pursued a teaching or pastoral ministry instead of becoming a missionary to the Indians.

After a year on the farm he came back to East Haddam and began to prepare himself to enter Yale. This was the summer of 1738. He was twenty years old. During the year on the farm he had made a commitment to God to enter the ministry. But still he was not converted. He read the Bible through twice that year and began to see more clearly that all his religion was legalistic and simply based on his own efforts. He had great quarreling with God within his soul. He rebelled against original sin and against the strictness of the

divine law and against the sovereignty of God. He quarreled with the fact that there was nothing he could do in his own strength to commend himself to God (113–124).

He came to see that “all my good frames were but self-righteousness, not bottomed on a desire for the glory of God” (103).

*There was no more goodness in my praying than there would be in my paddling with my hands in the water... because (my prayers) were not performed from any love or regard to God... I never once prayed for the glory of God (134).*

*I never once intended his honor and glory... I had never once acted for God in all my devotions... I used to charge them with sin... (because) of wanderings and vain thoughts... and not because I never had any regard in them to the glory of God (136).*

## **A View Of Unspeakable Glory**

Half an hour before sunset at the age of 21 he was in a lonely place trying to pray.

*As I was walking in a dark thick grave, “unspeakable glory” seemed to open to the view and apprehension of my soul... It was a new inward apprehension or view that I had of God; such as I never had before, nor anything that I had the least remembrance of it. So that I stood still and wondered and admired... I had now no particular apprehension of any one person of the Trinity, either the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, but it appeared to be divine glory and splendor that I then beheld. And my soul “rejoiced with joy unspeakable” to see such a God, such a glorious divine being, and I was inwardly pleased and satisfied that he should be God over all forever and ever. My soul was so capti-*

*vated and delighted with the excellency, the loveliness and the greatness and other perfections of God that I was even swallowed up in him, at least to that degree that I had no thought, as I remember at first, about my own salvation or scarce that there was such a creature as I.*

*Thus the Lord, I trust, brought me to a hearty desire to exalt him, to set him on the throne and to “seek first his Kingdom,” i.e. principally and ultimately to aim at his honor and glory as the King and sovereign of the universe, which is the foundation of the religion of Jesus. . . I felt myself in a new world (138–140).*

It was the Lord’s Day, July 12, 1739. He was 21 years old. Two months later he entered Yale to prepare for the ministry. It was a hard beginning. There was hazing by the upperclassmen, little spirituality, difficult studies, and he got measles and had to go home for several weeks during that first year.

The next year he was sent home because he was so sick he was spitting blood. So even at this early age he already had the tuberculosis he would die of seven years later. The amazing thing may not be that he died so early and accomplished so little, but that, being as sick as he was, he lived as long as he did and accomplished so much.

## **The Spiritual Awakening At Yale**

When he came back to Yale in November, 1740, the spiritual climate was radically changed. George Whitefield had been there, and now many students were very serious about their faith, which suited Brainerd well. In fact, tensions were emerging between the awakened students and the less excited faculty and staff. In 1741 pastor-evangelists, Gilbert Tennent,

Ebenezer Pemberton, and James Davenport fanned the flames of discontent among the students with their fiery preaching.

Jonathan Edwards was invited to preach the commencement address in 1741 in the hopes that he would pour a little water on the fire and stand up for the faculty against the enthusiasm of the students. Some faculty had even been criticized as being unconverted. Edwards preached a sermon called “The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God,” and totally disappointed the faculty and staff. He argued that the work going on in the awakening of those days, and specifically among the students, was a real spiritual work in spite of the excesses.

That very morning the following statement had been voted by the college trustees:

*If any student of this College shall directly or indirectly say, that the Rector, either of the Trustees or tutors are hypocrites, carnal or unconverted men, he shall for the first offence make a public confession in the hall, and for the second offence be expelled (41).*

Edwards was clearly more sympathetic with the students than the college was. He even went so far as to say in his commencement address that afternoon, “It is no evidence that a work is not the work of God, if many that are subjects of it... are guilty of (so) great forwardness to censure others as unconverted” (42).

### **Expelled for Another Plan**

Brainerd was in the crowd as Edwards spoke. One can't help but wonder whether Edwards later felt some responsibility for

what happened to Brainerd the next term. He was at the top of his class academically but was summarily expelled in early 1742 during his third year. He was overheard to say that one of the tutors, Chauncey Whittelsey, “has no more grace than a chair” and that he wondered why the Rector “did not drop down dead” for fining students for their evangelical zeal (42, 155).

This expulsion wounded Brainerd very deeply. He tried again and again in the next several years to make things right. Numerous people came to his aid, but all to no avail. God had another plan for Brainerd. Instead of a quiet six years in the pastorate or lecture hall followed by death and little historical significance at all, God meant to drive him into the wilderness that he might suffer for his sake and make an incalculable impact on the history of missions.

Before the way was cut off for him to the pastorate, Brainerd had no thought of being a missionary to the Indians. But now he had to rethink his whole life. There was a law, recently passed, that no established minister could be installed in Connecticut who had not graduated from Harvard, Yale or a European University. (52) Brainerd felt cut off from his life calling.

There is a tremendous lesson here. God is at work for the glory of his name and the good of his church even when the good intentions of his servants fail—even when that failing is owing to sin or carelessness. One careless word, spoken in haste, and Brainerd’s life seemed to fall apart before his eyes. But God knew better, and Brainerd came to accept it. In fact, I am tempted to speculate whether the modern missionary movement, that was so repeatedly inspired by Brainerd’s missionary life, would have happened if David

Brainerd had not been expelled from Yale and cut off from his hopes to serve God in the pastorate!

### **Sent to the American Indians**

In the summer of 1742 a group of ministers sympathetic to the Great Awakening (called New Lights) licensed Brainerd to preach. Jonathan Dickinson, the leading Presbyterian in New Jersey, took an interest in Brainerd and tried to get him reinstated in Yale. When that failed the suggestion was made that Brainerd become a missionary to the Indians under the sponsorship of the Commissioners of the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge. Dickinson was one of those Commissioners. On November 25, 1742 Brainerd was examined for his fitness for the work and appointed as a missionary to the Indians (188).

He spent the winter serving a church on Long Island so that he could enter the wilderness in the spring. His first assignment was to the Housatonic Indians at Kaunaumek about 20 miles northwest of Stockbridge, Massachusetts where Edwards would eventually serve as a missionary to the Indians. He arrived April 1, 1743 and preached for one year, using an interpreter and trying to learn the language from John Sergeant, the veteran missionary at Stockbridge. (228) He was able to start a school for Indian children and translate some of the Psalms (61).

Then came a reassignment to go to the Indians along the Delaware River in Pennsylvania. So on May 1, 1744 he left Kaunaumek and settled in the Forks of the Delaware, northeast of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. At the end of the month he

rode to Newark, N.J. to be examined by the Newark Presbytery and was ordained on June 11, 1744 (251–252).

Brainerd preached to the Indians at the Forks of the Delaware for one year. But on June 19, 1745 he made his first preaching tour to the Indians at Crossweeksung, New Jersey. This was the place where God moved in amazing power and brought awakening and blessing to the Indians. Within a year there were 130 persons in his growing assembly of believers (376). The whole Christian community moved from Crossweeksung to Cranberry in May 1746 to have their own land and village. Brainerd stayed with these Indians until he was too sick to minister, and in November 1746 he left Cranberry to spend four months trying to recuperate in Elizabethtown at the house of Jonathan Dickinson.

On March 20, 1747 David Brainerd made one last visit to his Indian friends and then rode to the house of Jonathan Edwards in Northampton, Massachusetts, arriving May 28, 1747. He made one trip to Boston during the summer and then returned and died of tuberculosis in Edwards' house October 9, 1747.

### The Impact of Brainerd's Life

It was a short life: twenty-nine years, five months and nineteen days. Only eight of those years as a believer, and only four of those as a missionary. Why has Brainerd's life made the impact that it has? One obvious reason is that Jonathan Edwards took the Diaries and published them as a *Life of Brainerd* in 1749. But why has this book never been out of print? Why did John Wesley say, "Let every preacher read

carefully over the ‘Life of Brainerd (3)’”? Why was it written of Henry Martyn that “perusing the life of David Brainerd, his soul was filled with a holy emulation of that extraordinary man; and after deep consideration and fervent prayer, he was at length fixed in a resolution to imitate his example”?<sup>2</sup> Why did William Carey regard Edwards’ *Life of Brainerd* as a sacred text? Why did Robert Morrison and Robert McCheyne of Scotland and John Mills of America and Frederick Schwartz of Germany and David Livingston of England and Andrew Murray of South Africa and Jim Elliot of modern America look upon Brainerd with a kind of awe and draw power from him the way they and countless others did (4)?

Gideon Hawley, another missionary protégé of Jonathan Edwards spoke for hundreds when he wrote about his struggles as a missionary in 1753,

*I need, greatly need something more than humane [human or natural] to support me. I read my Bible and Mr. Brainerd’s Life, the only books I brought with me, and from them have a little support (3).*

Why has this life had such an impact? Or perhaps I should just pose a more modest and manageable question: *Why does it have such an impact on me? How has it helped me to press on in the ministry and to strive for holiness and divine power and fruitfulness in my life?*

The answer for me is that Brainerd’s life is a vivid, powerful testimony to the truth that God can and does use weak, sick, discouraged, beat-down, lonely, struggling saints, who cry to him day and night, to accomplish amazing things for his glory.

To illustrate this we will look first at Brainerd's struggles, then at how he responded to them and finally at how God used him with all his weaknesses.

## his struggles

Brainerd struggled with almost constant sickness.

He had to drop out of college for some weeks because he had begun to cough up blood in 1740. In May of 1744 he wrote, "Rode several hours in the rain through the howling wilderness, although I was so disordered in body that little or nothing but blood came from me" (247). Now and again he would write something like:

In the afternoon my pain increased exceedingly; and was obliged to betake myself to bed... Was sometimes almost bereaved of the exercise of my reason by the extremity of pain (253). In August of 1746 he wrote:

*Having lain in cold sweat all night, I coughed much bloody matter this morning, and was under great disorder of body, and not a little melancholy (420).*

In September he wrote,

*Exercised with a violent cough and a considerable fever; had no appetite to any kind of food; and frequently brought up what I ate, as soon as it was down; and oftentimes had little rest in my bed, by reason of pains in my breast and back: was able, however, to ride over to my people, about two miles, every day, and take some care of those who were then at work upon a small house for me to reside in amongst the Indians (430).*

In May of 1747 at Jonathan Edwards' house the doctors told him that he had incurable consumption and did not have long to live (447). In the last couple of months of his life the suffering was incredible. September 24: "In the greatest distress that ever I endured having an uncommon kind of hiccough; which either strangled me or threw me into a straining to vomit" (469). Edwards comments in the week before he died,

*He told me it was impossible for any to conceive of the distress he felt in his breast. He manifested much concern lest he should dishonor God by impatience under his extreme agony; which was such that he said the thought of enduring it one minute longer was almost insupportable. And the night before he died he said to those around him that it was another thing to die than people imagined (475–476).*

What strikes the reader of these diaries is not just the severity of Brainerd's suffering in the days before antibiotics and pain killers, but especially how relentless the sickness was. It was almost always there. And yet he pressed on with his work.

Brainerd struggled with relentlessly recurring depression. Brainerd came to understand more fully from his own experience the difference between spiritual desertion and the disease of melancholy. So his later judgments about his own spiritual condition are probably more careful than the earlier ones. But however one assesses his psychological condition, he was tormented again and again with the blackest discouragements. And the marvel is that he survived and kept going at all.

Brainerd said he had been this way from his youth (101). But he said that there was a difference between the depression

he suffered before and after his conversion. After his conversion there seemed to be a rock of electing love under him that would catch him, so that in his darkest times he could still affirm the truth and goodness of God, even though he couldn't sense it for a season (93, 141, 165, 278).

But it was bad enough nevertheless. Often his distress was owing to the hatred of his own remaining sinfulness. Thursday, November 4, 1742. "Tis distressing to feel in my soul that hell of corruption which still remains in me" (185). Sometimes this sense of unworthiness was so intense that he felt cut off from the presence of God.

*January 23, 1743:*

*Scarce ever felt myself so unfit to exist, as now: I saw I was not worthy of a place among the Indians, where I am going... None knows, but those that feel it, what the soul endures that is sensibly shut out from the presence of God: Alas, 'tis more bitter than death (195-6)!*

He often called his depression an kind of death. I counted at least 22 places in the Diary where he longed for death as a freedom from his misery. For example,

*Sunday, February 3, 1745:*

*My soul remember "the wormwood and the gall" (I might almost say hell) of Friday last; and I was greatly afraid I should be obliged again to drink of that "cup of trembling," which was inconceivably more bitter than death, and made me long for the grave more, unspeakably more, than for hid treasures (285).*

*Sunday, December 16, 1744:*

*Was so overwhelmed with dejection that I knew not how to live: I longed for death exceedingly: My soul was “sunk in deep waters,” and “the floods” were ready to “drown me:” I was so much oppressed that my soul was in a kind of horror (278).*

It caused him compounded misery that his mental distress hindered his ministry and his devotion.

*Wednesday, March 9, 1743:*

*Rode 16 miles to Montauk, and had some inward sweetness on the road, but something of flatness and deadness after I came there and had seen the Indians: I withdrew and endeavored to pray, but found myself awfully deserted and left, and had an afflicting sense of my vileness and meanness (199).*

At times he was simply immobilized by the distresses and couldn't function anymore.

*Tuesday, September 2, 1746:*

*Was scarce ever more confounded with a sense of my own unfruitfulness and unfitness of my work, than now. Oh, what a dead, heartless, barren, unprofitable wretch did I now see myself to be! My spirits were so low, and my bodily strength so wasted, that I could do nothing at all. At length, being much overdone, lay down on a buffalo skin; but sweat much of the whole night (423ff).*

It is simply amazing how often Brainerd pressed on with the practical necessities of his work in the face of these waves of discouragement. This has no doubt endeared him to many a missionary who know first hand the kinds of pain he endured.

Brainerd struggled with loneliness.

He tells of having to endure the profane talk of two strangers one night in April, 1743 and says, “Oh, I longed that some dear Christian knew my distress (204)!” A month later he says,

*Most of the talk I hear is either Highland Scotch or Indian. I have no fellow Christian to whom I might unbosom myself and lay open my spiritual sorrows, and with whom I might take sweet counsel in conversation about heavenly things, and join in social prayer (207).*

This misery made him sometimes shrink back from going off on another venture. Tuesday, May 8, 1744: “My hear sometimes was ready to sink with the thoughts of my work, and going alone in the wilderness, I knew not where” (248).

In December, 1745 he wrote a letter to his friend Eleazar Wheelock and said, “I doubt not by that time you have read my journal through you’ll be more sensible of the need I stand in of a companion in travel than ever you was before” (584).

But he didn’t just want any kind of person of course. He wanted a soul companion. Many of us can empathize with him when he says:

*There are many with whom I can talk about religion: but alas, I find few with whom I can talk religion itself: But, blessed be the Lord, there are some that love to feed on the kernel rather than the shell (292).*

But Brainerd was alone in his ministry to the end. The last 19 weeks of his life Jerusha Edwards, Jonathan Edwards’s 17 year old daughter, was his nurse and many speculate that

there was deep love between them. But in the wilderness and in the ministry, he was alone, and could only pour out his soul to God. And God bore him and kept him going.

Brainerd struggled with immense external hardships.

He describes his first mission station at Kaunaameek in May, 1743:

*I live poorly with regard to the comforts of life: most of my diet consists of boiled corn, hasty pudding, etc. I lodge on a bundle of straw, and my labor is hard and extremely difficult; and I have little experience of success to comfort me (207).*

In August he says:

*In this weak state of body, (I) was not a little distressed for want of suitable food. Had no bread, nor could I get any. I am forced to go or send ten or fifteen miles for all the bread I eat; and sometimes 'tis moldy and sour before I eat it, if I get any considerable quantity... But through divine goodness I had some Indian meal, of which I made little cakes and fried them. Yet felt contented with my circumstances, and sweetly resigned to God (213–214).*

He says that he was frequently lost in the woods and was exposed to cold and hunger (222). He speaks of his horse being stolen or being poisoned or breaking a leg (294, 339). He tells about how the smoke from a fireplace would often make the room intolerable to his lungs and he would have to go out into the cold to get his breath, and then could not sleep through the night (422).

But the struggle with external hardships, as great as they were, was not his worst struggle. He had an amazing resigna-

tion and even rest it seems in many of these circumstances. He knew where they fit in his biblical approach to life:

*Such fatigues and hardship as these serve to wean me more from the earth; and, I trust, will make heaven the sweeter. Formerly, when I was thus exposed to cold, rain, etc., I was ready to please myself with the thoughts of enjoying a comfortable house, a warm fire, and other outward comforts; but now these have less place in my heart (through the grace of God) and my eye is more to God for comfort. In this world I expect tribulation; and it does not now, as formerly, appear strange to me; I don't in such seasons of difficulty flatter myself that it will be better hereafter; but rather think how much worse it might be; how much greater trials others of God's children have endured; and how much greater are yet perhaps reserved for me. Blessed be God that he makes [is] the comfort to me, under my sharpest trials; and scarce ever lets these thoughts be attended with terror or melancholy; but they are attended frequently with great joy (274).*

So in spite of the terrible external hardships that Brainerd knew, he pressed on and even flourished under these tribulations that led to the kingdom.

Brainerd struggled with a bleak outlook on nature.

We will forgive him for this quickly because none of us has suffered physically what he suffered or endured the hardships he did in the wilderness. It is hard to relish the beauty of a rose when you are coughing up blood.

But we have to see this as part of Brainerd's struggle because an eye for beauty instead of bleakness might have light-

ened some of his load. Edwards extolled Brainerd for not being a person of “warm imagination” (93). This was a virtue for Edwards because it meant that Brainerd was free from what he called religious “enthusiasm”—the intensity of religious emotion based on sudden impressions and sights in the imagination rather than on spiritual apprehension of God’s moral perfections. So Edwards applauded Brainerd for not having “strong and lively images formed in his imagination” (93).

But there is a costly downside to an unimaginative mind. In Brainerd’s case it meant that he seemed to see nothing in nature but a “howling wilderness” and a bleak enemy. There was nothing in his diaries like the transports of Jonathan Edwards as he walked in the woods and saw images of divine glory and echoes of God’s excellence everywhere.

Norman Pettit is basically right it seems to me when he says:

*Where Edwards saw mountains and waste places as the setting for divine disclosure, Brainerd saw only a “howling desert.” Where Edwards would take spiritual delight “in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds, and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees,” Brainerd never mentioned natural beauty. In contrast to Edwards’ joy in summer is Brainerd’s fear of winter (23).*

Brainerd never mentioned an attractive landscape or sunset. He did at one place say he had discovered the need for diversions in his labor for the sake of maximizing his usefulness (292). But he never once described such a diversion or any impact on him that it had.

It is a sad thing that Brainerd was blinded (perhaps by his suffering) to one of God’s antidotes to depression. Spurgeon described this as well as anyone:

*To sit long in one posture, pouring over a book, or driving a quill, is in itself a taxing of nature; but add to this a badly ventilated chamber, a body which has long been without muscular exercise, and a heart burdened with many cares, and we have all the elements for preparing a seething cauldron of despair, especially in the dim months of fog ... Nature outside his window is calling him to health and beckoning him to joy. He who forgets the humming of the bees among the heather, the cooing of the wood-pigeons in the forest, the song of the birds in the woods, the rippling of rills among the rushes, and the sighing of the wind among the pines, needs not wonder if his heart forgets to sing and his soul grows heavy.<sup>3</sup>*

I say we will forgive Brainerd quickly for not drawing strength and refreshment from God's gallery of joy, because his suffering made it so hard for him to see. But we must make every effort not to succumb with him here. Spurgeon and Edwards are the models for us on ministerial uses of nature. And, of course, an even greater authority said, "Consider the lilies."

Brainerd struggled to love the indians.

If love is known by sacrifice, then Brainerd loved. But if it is also known by heartfelt compassion then Brainerd struggled to love more than he did. Sometimes he was melted with love.

*September 18, 1742:*

*Felt some compassion for souls, and mourned I had no more. I feel much more kindness, meekness, gentleness and love towards all mankind, than ever (181).*

*December 26, 1742:*

*Felt much sweetness and tenderness in prayer, especially my whole soul seemed to love my worst enemies, and was enabled to pray for those that are strangers and enemies to God with a great degree of softness and pathetic fervor (193).*

*Tuesday, July 2, 1745:*

*Felt my heat drawn out after God in prayer, almost all the forenoon; especially while riding. And in the evening, could not help crying to God for those poor Indians; and after I went to bed my heart continued to go out to God for them, till I dropped asleep. Oh, 'Blessed be God that I may pray!' (302).*

But other times he seemed empty of affection or compassion for their souls. He expresses guilt that he should preach to immortal souls with no more ardency and so little desire for their salvation (235). His compassion could simply go flat.

*November 2, 1744:*

*About noon, rode up to the Indians; and while going, could feel no desires for them, and even dreaded to say anything to 'em (272).*

So Brainerd struggled with the rise and fall of love in his own heart. He loved, but longed to love so much more.

Brainerd struggled to stay true to his calling.

Even though Brainerd's expulsion from Yale initially hindered his entering the pastorate, and turned him to consider the missionary career, the missionary call he felt from the Lord in this was not abandoned when other opportunities for the pastorate finally did come along. There were several

opportunities for him to have a much easier life in the settled life of the parish minister.

The church at Millington, near his hometown of Haddam, called him in March of 1744, and he describes the call as a great care and burden. He turned it down and prayed that the Lord would send laborers to his vineyard (244). The church at East Hampton on Long Island called him, too. Jonathan Edwards called this “the fairest, pleasantest town on the whole island, and one of its largest and most wealthy parishes.” Brainerd wrote on Thursday, April 5:

*Resolved to go on still with the Indian affair, if divine providence permitted; although before felt some inclination to go to East Hampton, where I was solicited to go (245).*

There were other opportunities, too. But each time the struggle was resolved with this sense of burden and call:

*[I] could have no freedom in the thought of any other circumstances or business in life: All my desire was the conversion of the heathen, and all my hope was in God: God does not suffer me to please or comfort myself with hopes of seeing friends, returning to my dear acquaintance, and enjoying worldly comforts (263).*

So the struggle was obviously there, but he was held to his post by a readiness to suffer and a passion to see the kingdom of Christ spread among the Indians.

### **Brainerd's Passion to Press on for God's Kingdom**

I think the reason Brainerd's life has such powerful effects on people is that in spite of all his struggles he never gave up

his faith or his ministry. He was consumed with a passion to finish his race and honor his Master and spread the kingdom and advance in personal holiness. It was this unswerving allegiance to the cause of Christ that makes the bleakness of his life glow with glory so that we can understand Henry Martyn when he wrote, as a student in Cambridge in 1802, “I long to be like him (4)!”

Brainerd called his passion for more holiness and more usefulness a kind of “pleasing pain.”

*When I really enjoy God, I feel my desires of him the more insatiable, and my thirstings after holiness the more unquenchable;... Oh, for holiness! Oh, for more of God in my soul! Oh, this pleasing pain! It makes my soul press after God... Oh, that I might not loiter on my heavenly journey (186)!*

He was gripped with by the apostolic admonition: “Redeem the time for the days are evil.” (Ephesians 5:16) He embodied the counsel: “Let us not grow weary in well doing, for in due time we shall reap if we do not faint.” (Galatians 6:9) He strove to be, as Paul says, “abounding in the work of the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:58).

*April 17, 1747:*

*O I longed to fill the remaining moments all for God! Though my body was so feeble, and wearied with preaching and much private conversation, yet I wanted to sit up all night to do something for God. To God the giver of these refreshments, be glory forever and ever; Amen (246).*

February 21, 1746:

*My soul was refreshed and comforted, and I could not but bless God, who had enabled me in some good measure to be faithful in the day past. Oh, how sweet it is to be spent and worn out for God (366)!*

Among all the means that Brainerd used for pursuing greater and greater holiness and usefulness, prayer and fasting stand out above all. We read of him spending whole days in prayer (172), and sometimes setting aside six times in the day to pray (280), and sometimes seeking out a family or friend to pray with. He prayed for his own sanctification. He prayed for the conversion and purity of his Indians. He prayed for the advancement of the kingdom of Christ around the world and especially in America. Sometimes the spirit of prayer would hold him so deeply that he could scarcely stop.

Once, visiting in a home with friends, he got alone to pray:

*I continued wrestling with God in prayer for my dear little flock here; and more especially for the Indians elsewhere; as well as for dear friends in one place and another; till it was bed time and I feared I should hinder the family, etc. But oh, with what reluctance did I find myself obliged to consume time in sleep (402)!*

And along with prayer, Brainerd pursued holiness and usefulness with fasting. Again and again in his Diary he tells of days spent in fasting. He fasted for guidance when he was perplexed about the next steps of his ministry. And he fasted simply with the deep hope of making greater advances in his own spiritual depth and his usefulness in bringing life to the Indians. When he was dying in Edwards's house he urged young

ministers who came to see him to engage in frequent days of private prayer and fasting because of how useful it was (473).

Edwards himself said,

*Among all the many days he spent in secret fasting and prayer and that he gives an account of in his diary, there is scarce an instance of one but what was either attended or soon followed with apparent success and a remarkable blessing in special incomes and consolations of God's Spirit; and very often before the day was ended (531).*

Along with prayer and fasting, Brainerd bought up the time with study and mingled all three of these together.

*December 20, 1745:*

*I spent much of the day in writing; but was enabled to intermix prayer with my studies (280).*

*January 7, 1744:*

*Spent this day in seriousness, with steadfast resolutions for God and a life of mortification. Studied closely, till I felt my bodily strength fail (234).*

*December 20, 1742:*

*Spent this day in prayer, reading and writing; and enjoyed some assistance, especially in correcting some thoughts on a certain subject (192).*

He was constantly writing and thinking about theological things. That's why we have the Diaries and Journal! But there was more. We frequently read things like, "Was most of the day employed in writing on a divine subject. Was fre-

quent in prayer” (240). “I spent most of the time in writing on a sweet divine subject” (284). “Was engaged in writing again almost the whole day” (287). “Rose early and wrote by candlelight some considerable time; spent most of the day in writing” (344). “Towards night, enjoyed some of the clearest thoughts on a divine subject... that ever I remember to have had upon any subject whatsoever; and spent two or three hours in writing them” (359).

Brainerd’s life is one long agonizing strain to “redeem the time” and “not grow weary in well doing” and “abound in the work of the Lord.” And what makes his life so powerful is that he pressed on in this passion under the immense struggles and hardships that he did.

## The Effect of Brainerd’s Life

The impact on Jonathan Edwards was exponential.

First, I would mention the effect on Jonathan Edwards, the great pastor and theologian of Northampton. Edwards’s bears his own testimony:

*I would conclude my observations on the merciful circumstances of Mr. Brainerd’s death without acknowledging with thankfulness the gracious dispensation of Providence to me and my family in so ordering that he... should be cast hither to my house, in his last sickness, and should die here: So that we had opportunity for much acquaintance and conversation with him, and to show him kindness in such circumstances, and to see his dying behavior, to hear his dying speeches, to receive his dying counsels, and to have the benefit of his dying prayers (541).*

Edwards said this even though he must have known it probably cost him the life of his daughter to have Brainerd in his house with that terrible disease. Jerusha had tended Brainerd as a nurse for the last 19 weeks of his life, and four months after he died she died of the same affliction. So Edwards really meant what he said, that it was a “gracious dispensation of Providence” that Brainerd came to his house to die.

As a result of the immense impact of Brainerd’s devotion on Jonathan Edwards, Edwards wrote in the next two years the *Life of Brainerd*, which has been reprinted more often than any of his other books. And through this *Life* the impact of Brainerd on the church has been incalculable. Beyond all the famous missionaries who tell us that they have been sustained and inspired by Brainerd’s *Life*, how many countless other unknown faithful servants must there be who have found strength to press on from Brainerd’s testimony!

Princeton and Dartmouth were founded.

A lesser known effect of Brainerd’s life—one that owes far more to the gracious Providence of God than to any intention on Brainerd’s part—was the founding of Princeton College and Dartmouth College. Jonathan Dickinson and Aaron Burr, who were Princeton’s first leaders and among its founders, took direct interest in Brainerd’s case at Yale and were extremely upset that the school would not readmit him.

This event brought to a head the dissatisfaction that the New York and New Jersey Presbyterian Synods had with Yale and crystallized the resolve to found their own school. The College of New Jersey (later, Princeton) was chartered in Oc-

tober, 1746. Dickinson was made the first president and when the classes began in his house in May of 1747 in Elizabethtown, Brainerd was there trying to recover in his last months, and was thus considered to be the first student enrolled. David Field and Archibald Alexander and others testify that in a real sense “Princeton college was founded because of Brainerd’s expulsion from Yale” (55).

Another surprising effect of Brainerd’s life is the inspiration he provided for the founding of Dartmouth College by Eleazer Wheelock. Brainerd felt a failure among the Iroquois Indians on the Susquehanna. He labored among them for a year or so and then moved on. But his Diary of the time kindled the commitment of Wheelock to go to the Iroquois of Connecticut. And inspired by Brainerd’s example in teaching the Indians, he founded a school in 1748 for Indians and whites at Lebanon. Later it was moved to Hanover, New Hampshire where Wheelock founded Dartmouth College.

In 1740 Yale, Harvard, and William and Mary were the only Colonial colleges, and they were not sympathetic to the Evangelical piety of the Great Awakening. But the tide of Awakening brought in a zeal for education as well as piety. The Presbyterians founded Princeton, the Baptists founded Brown, the Dutch Reformed founded Rutgers, and the Congregationalists founded Dartmouth. It is remarkable that David Brainerd must be reckoned as an essential motivational component in the founding of two of those schools. If he was a somewhat frustrated scholar, thinking and writing by candlelight in the wilderness, his vision for evangelical higher education probably had a greater fulfillment than if he had given his life to that cause instead of to his missionary passion.

Many souls will enjoy God forever.

I close by stating that the most awesome effect of Brainerd's ministry is the same as the most awesome effect of every pastor's ministry. There are a few Indians—perhaps several hundreds—who owe their everlasting life to the direct love and ministry of David Brainerd. Some of their individual stories would make another lecture—a very inspiring one. Who can describe the value of one soul transferred from the kingdom of darkness, and from the weeping and gnashing of teeth, to the kingdom of God's dear Son! If we live 29 years or if we live 99 years, would not any hardships be worth the saving of one person from the eternal torments of hell for the everlasting enjoyment of the glory of God?

My last word must be the same as Edwards's. I thank God for the ministry of David Brainerd in my own life. From a journal that seems weak and worldly compared to Brainerd's I quote:

*June 28, 1986*

*This afternoon Tom and Julie (Steller) and I drove to Northampton. We found the gravestone of David Brainerd, a dark stone slab the size of the grave top and a smaller white marble inset with these words:*

*Sacred to the memory of the  
Rev. David Brainerd. A faithful and  
laborious missionary to the  
Stockbridge, Delaware and Susquehanna  
TRIBES OF INDIANS WHO  
died in this town. October 10, 1747 AE 32<sup>t</sup>*

Tom and Julie (and Ruth and Hannah) and I took hands and stood around the grave and prayed to thank God for Brainerd and Jonathan Edwards and to dedicate ourselves to their work and their God. It was a memorable, and I hope, powerful and lasting moment.

## Notes

- 1 The Life of David Brainerd, ed. Norman Pettit, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 7, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 33. All page numbers in the text refer to this volume which contains not only Edwards' edition of Brainerd's Diaries, but also some journal extracts and an extensive introduction by Dr. Pettit and related correspondence.
- 2 "Brainerd, David," in *Religious Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 1, ed. Philip Schaff, (New York: the Christian literature Company, 1888), 320.
- 3 *Lectures to My Students*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), 158.
- 4 Both these facts are inaccurate: he died October 9 at the age of 29.

