

## Articles and Sermons :: When Is it Dangerous to Look at Jesus? by John Piper

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On vacation, I kept a copy of Jonathan Edwards' sermons on my bedside table as a way of going to sleep with a God-centered mind. One of those sermons was called, "Keeping the Presence of God." It was preached at a Colony-wide fast day in April, 1742.

The second wave of the First Great Awakening had crested in the vicinity, and Edwards was seeing both the good and bad fallout of revival. He saw spiritual dangers lurking everywhere. In the next year, as he preached his famous series on The Religious Affections, he would become the most careful analyst and student of human hearts that had been awakened in the revival. What he saw in those hearts was mixed.

So in this sermon, "Keeping the Presence of God," his aim was to stir up awakened Christians to be vigilant that their exuberance not become pride. He exhorted them to give themselves to watchfulness and prayer so as to remain broken and humble and happy in the good work of God in their lives.

Oh, how different is the path of Christian maturity pointed out by Edwards and the path most Christians walk today. There is a kind of cavalier attitude toward our security today. There is little trembling. Little vigilance and earnestness and caution and watchfulness over our souls. There is a kind of casual, slack, careless attitude toward the possibility that we might make shipwreck of our faith and fail to lay hold on eternal life. We have the notion that security is a kind of mechanical, automatic thing. We prayed once to receive Jesus. We are safe and there is no place for "working out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). That is not what Edwards sees in the Bible.

Therefore he pleads with his people, and I plead with you, to "keep the presence of God." It is not automatic. Edwards' text is 2 Chronicles 15:1-2 which contains the words, "The Lord is with you while you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you." Since we do not want God to forsake us, we must be watchful over our souls lest we forsake him. It is true that God will never forsake his own children. But the proof that we are his children is that he works in us the vigilance not to forsake him. God's not forsaking us is the work he does in us to keep us from forsaking him (Philippians 2:12-13).

The striking thing in this sermon that was new for me was the warning that even beholding Christ can be a pitfall. This seems unlikely because in 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul says, "We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another." In other words, seeing the glory of Christ in the gospel is a great means of becoming like Jesus. This is how we are sanctified—seeing Christ.

So why would Edwards warn us that seeing Christ can be a pitfall? He did so because of what he read nine chapters later in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. Paul said there that he had "been caught up into paradise" (12:3) and that he had been given "visions and revelations of the Lord" (12:1). Then he said that because of these visions and revelations of the Lord he had been given a "thorn in the flesh" (12:7) to keep him from being puffed up. Paul pleaded with the Lord to take it away (12:8). But the Lord said that his own grace would shine the more brightly in Paul's thorn-caused weakness than if he were whole.

This means that Paul's visions of the Lord were dangerous for his soul. He had to be lamed by a thorn to keep these visions from hurting him. Here is the way Edwards says it:

There is great danger. I know great degrees of the spiritual presence of God tend greatly to restrain and keep down pride. But yet 'tis not all grace. And though in such cases there be much to restrain one way, so there is much to tempt and provoke it another. Temptations in such cases are often exceeding great. To be highly loved and exalted of God tends to feed pride exceedingly, if there be any left. The apostle Paul himself was not out of danger (2 Cor. 12:7). (Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 22 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 531)

In other words, the danger of spiritual pride is so subtle that we must even watch for it at the place of greatest sanctification—seeing the glory of the Lord. If there is any remnant of pride in us, even pure glory can be twisted to feed it.

So I exhort you, along with myself, in the words of Jonathan Edwards: "You had need to have the greatest watch imaginable with respect to this matter, and to cry most earnestly to the great searcher of hearts: for he that trusts his own heart is a fool" (Works, vol. 22, p. 531).