

Spiritual Growth – God’s Gracious Initiative, Our Earnest Response
Part 1 – To Know Him Fully, God’s Commitment to Our Growth
2 Peter 1:3-4

Insight from Jonathan Edwards – the Younger and the Older

Younger: 1722-23, 19 years old, newly minted minister. Young, idealistic, driven, laying the foundation of the man he hopes to become. He wrote Seventy Resolutions, twenty-one of them initially that were expanded during the year.

Seventy Resolutions

Preamble: “Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God’s help, I do humbly entreat him by his grace to enable me to keep these resolutions so far as they are agreeable to his will for Christ’s sake.”

- “Resolved, that I will do whatsoever I think to be most to God’s glory and my own good, profit and pleasure, in the whole of my duration.”
- “Resolved, to study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly and frequently, as that I may find and plainly perceive myself to grow.”
- “Resolved, to strive to my utmost every week to be brought higher in religion and to a higher exercise of grace.”
- “Resolved, never to lose one moment of time, but improve it the most profitable way I possibly can.”
- “Resolved, never to do anything which I should be afraid to do if it were the last hour of my life.”
- “Resolved, to endeavor to my utmost to deny whatever is not most agreeable to a good, and universally sweet and benevolent, quiet, peaceable, contented, easy, compassionate, generous, humble, meek, modest, submissive, obliging, diligent and industrious, charitable, even, patient, moderate, forgiving, sincere temper; and to do at all times what such a temper would lead me to. Examine strictly every week, whether I have done so.”
- “Resolved, whenever I do any conspicuously evil action, to trace it back till I come to the original cause; and then, both carefully endeavor to do so no more, and to fight and pray with all my might against the original of it.”
- “Resolved, never to give over, nor in the least to slacken, my fight with my corruptions, however unsuccessful I may be.”
- “Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live.”

And many more that can be categorized under overall life mission, good works, time management, relationships, suffering, character, and spiritual life.¹

Older: Wiser, wearier, Edwards looked back and saw those youthful resolutions differently. The mature Edwards recognized the limitations of his youthful zeal. His self-examination, though sincere, was marred by an overreliance on personal willpower rather than on God’s sustaining grace.

¹ See, “The Resolutions of Jonathan Edwards,” *Desiring God*, December 30, 2006, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-resolutions-of-jonathan-edwards>. For Edward’s narrative on his spiritual journey relative to these resolutions, see Janice Campbell, “Personal Narrative by Jonathan Edwards,” *Excellence in Literature*, July 30, 2013, updated August 26, 2013, <https://www.excellence-in-literature.com/personal-narrative-by-jonathan-edwards-2/>.

- “When I was young, I was always examining myself and studying and contriving the best ways for how I should live in holiness with far greater diligence and earnestness than ever I pursued anything in my life. But I did this with much too great of a dependence on my own strength, which afterwards proved a great damage to me. Back then, my experience had not yet taught me as it has done since my extreme feebleness and impotence in every manner of way. I didn’t yet know the innumerable and bottomless depths of secret corruption and deceit that there was in my heart.”²

A Comparison

	Young Edwards	Mature Edwards
Spiritual Formation	Driven by personal discipline and structured goals	Recognized need for Spirit-driven dependence
Self-Knowledge	Believed in the power of resolve and structure	Grew aware of the deceitfulness of the heart
View of Sin	Sought holiness through striving	Understood the depth of sin and need for grace
Dependence on God	Acknowledged, but not deeply internalized	Central to his later theology and practice
Maturity in Grace	Attempted transformation through will	Saw formation as a gift received through abiding

2 Peter 1 - Spiritual formation is not ultimately about your formation... It is about God.

1. ENERGIZED by the Power of God – 2 Peter 1:3-4

Animate beings grow differently than inanimate matter

- Inanimate – You can “grow” a set of landscape rocks by piling more on top or side by side. Or you can “grow” a deck by expanding the foundation and adding boards.
- Living things grow differently, not by imposing something from the outside, but organically, naturally from the life force that is inside – e.g., flower, grass/clover seed, baby.

True spiritual growth is not merely adding character traits or stacking good deeds into a growing portfolio of character.

- It is a powerful work of God in our lives from beginning to end by the spiritual DNA he gives us in the new birth, the Holy Spirit
- Power to overcome.... Habits we seem unable to break
Deep wounds of the soul or pieces of brokenness
Life situations that seem insurmountable

This begins with prayer and the faith that the Spirit can do in us what is simply unattainable on our own – Ephesians 1:15-19; 3:14ff

² For Edward’s narrative on his spiritual journey relative to these resolutions, see Janice Campbell, “Personal Narrative by Jonathan Edwards,” Excellence in Literature, July 30, 2013, updated August 26, 2013, <https://www.excellence-in-literature.com/personal-narrative-by-jonathan-edwards-2/>.

Contrasting Self-Dependence vs. God-Dependence

Self-Dependence

Relies on discipline and effort as ultimate means
Focuses on mastering techniques
Measures success by self-improvement
Fueled by fear of failure or self-justification
Can lead to discouragement when progress stalls
Treats spiritual growth like a project or goal

God-Dependence

Relies on God's grace working through spiritual practices
Focuses on abiding in Christ
Measures formation by increasing dependence on God
Rooted in rest, trust, and worship
Allows for grace in weakness and sustained formation
Treats growth as fruit of a relational life with God

Dangers of Self-Reliance

- **Moralism:** Turning formation into a checklist or proof of worth.
- **Discouragement:** Failing and thinking God is disappointed or distant.
- **Pride:** Believing spiritual progress is achieved by grit alone.
- **Retreat from God:** Using disciplines to avoid honest vulnerability before God.

Fruits of God-Dependence

- **Humility:** "Without Jesus, I can do nothing."
- **Grace-based perseverance:** Ongoing growth through failure and success.
- **Intimacy:** Formation as abiding, not just achieving.
- **Transformation:** Becoming more like Christ because of shared life with Him.

2. EXPERIENCED as a Deepening, Intimate Knowledge of God

It is the difference *gnosis* (knowledge through information) and *epignosis* (knowledge through experience). The word for "knowledge of God" is *epignosis*, coming to know him intimately

How we "know" things

- For example, a cell phone is a powerful technology. The only barrier to my "knowing" is my willingness to read a manual and tap into all its capabilities. It cannot stop me from getting to know it.
- Getting to know living things is different. We can know living things only when they *want* to be known. It's like the difference between knowing a dog and a cat.
- Think of a outstanding human being you have always wanted to know. Suppose you were able to meet with this person to get to "know" them.
 - Gnosis – Read all you can about them beforehand, visit happens, you get a polite welcome, exchange greetings, photo op, handshake, well-wish, gone. Keeps you at a distance.
 - Epignosis – Still read all you can, and when you meet, they let you into their life and mission, part of them begins to rub off on you.
- In a much more profound way, God invites us to know him intimately.

3. ENABLED and SUSTAINED by the Initiative of God

- “He called us *out of his own* glory and goodness.” (1:4)
- He shares himself generously so we may know him intimately - “called us by his own glory and goodness”

J. I. Packer: “There is unspeakable comfort in knowing that God is constantly taking knowledge of me in love, and watching over me for my good. There is tremendous relief in knowing that his love to me is utterly realistic, based at every point on his prior knowledge of the worst about me, so that no discovery can now disillusion him about me, in the way that I am so often disillusioned about myself, and quench his determination to bless me. There is, certainly, great cause for humility in the thought that He sees all the twisted things about me that my fellow human beings do not see (and I am glad!), and that He sees more corruption in me than that which I see in myself (which, in all good conscience, is enough). There is, however, equally great incentive to worship and love God in the thought that, for some unfathomable reason, He wants me as his friend, and desires to be my friend, and has given his Son to die for me in order to realize this purpose.”³

Series – Spiritual Growth, God’s Gracious Initiative, Our Earnest Response

- Lesson 1, Carlus Gupton, June 15 – God’s Initiative to Know Him Fully, 2 Peter 1:3-4
- Lesson 2, Carlus Gupton, June 22 – God’s Initiative: Sharing His Nature, Secured by His Promises, 2 Peter 1:3-4
- Lesson 3, Carlus Gupton, June 29 – Our Earnest Response: The Relationship Between Character and Diligence, 2 Peter 1:5-7
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- Lesson 7 – Carlus Gupton, August 3 – Our Earnes Response: The Grounding of Sound Theology, 1 Peter 1:12-21.

³ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (IVP Books, 1993), 37.