

Getaway sermon: Jonathan Edwards takes his leave

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 20, 2007](#) issue

Christopher Niebuhr of the well-known Niebuhr tribe wrote to me recently. He is celebrating the Yale University Press publication of *Sermons and Discourses, 1743-1758* (edited by Wilson H. Kimnach), 800 pages of transcribed scripts and notes that make up the 25th and final volume of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*.

Niebuhr sent me a copy of notes from the last sermon that Edwards preached to the Indians in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Edwards had been run out of Northampton's "Great Awakening" church in a complicated "Bad Book" fight over ministry to youth, and preached at Stockbridge from 1751 to 1754, when most of the Indian congregation dribbled away. (Of course, Edwards needed translators—John Wauwampequunnaunt for the Mohicans and Rebecca Ashley for the Mohawks.) Then, in 1758, this twice-failed cleric moved from Stockbridge to become president of the College of New Jersey, but died soon after he arrived.

Failed cleric? Yale does not invest decades and top scholars do not give their best years and their eyesight transcribing the scribbles of second-bests. Edwards was this continent's prime evangelist, awakener, theologian, preacher and more. He inspired a small library full of large books and articles examining him, molecule of ink by molecule of ink. Volume 25 advertises "additional volumes forthcoming," a signal that not all the scholars are up to speed on this unmatched publishing venture.

Many ministers have taken comfort from the fact that such a great preacher did not always satisfy his own congregation.

Christopher did not tell me why he chose to point me toward Edwards's "stirrup sermon," presumably preached the day he galloped away and one week after a more official farewell sermon. (Yale also reproduces a picture of Edwards's barely decipherable original notes.) But in these days of prosperity-gospel, positive-thinking and hooray-for-our-side "Left Behind" sermons, I thought readers might find it bracing to read how Edwards took leave:

WATCH AND PRAY ALWAYS

Luke 21:36 "*Watch ye, and pray always.*"

I. MANY dreadful things are coming upon this wicked world.

II. The righteous, and they only, shall be thought fit to escape those things that shall come.

III. All at last must be called to appear before Christ.

Christ will come.

All must see him.

All must [be] brought before him.

IV. The righteous shall be thought worthy to stand before Christ and no others.

First. The righteous worthy.

Second. Wicked not worthy.

V. We should watch and pray always that we may be thought worthy [to stand before Christ].

First. Watch.

Second. Pray.

Third. Always.

[APPLICATION]

What must watch against.

How watch.

What need of watching.

Always.

Prayer.

What pray for.

How pray.

There is no mention of a champagne toast, farewell gift or word of thanks from the congregation. You can be sure that, given this clear word from Edwards, we will 1) Watch and 2) Pray.