

JOHN FLETCHER

"Fletcher was a saint, as unearthly a being as could tread the earth at all," says Isaac Taylor, one of his contemporaries. "I conceive Fletcher to be the most holy man who has been upon earth since the apostolic age." says Dr. Dixon, one of the greatest Methodist preachers of Fletcher's day. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, pronounced Fletcher the most unblameable man, in every respect, that, within fourscore years, he had found in Europe or America. He chose Fletcher as his successor in directing the Methodist Societies; but Fletcher though younger than Wesley, was called to his eternal reward before Wesley.

Remarkable as it may seem, Fletcher was not a native of the country where he achieved so great fame as a writer and preacher. Jean Guillaume de la Flechere, for such was his full name in his native tongue, was born in Switzerland, his home being on the shores of Lake Lemman in one of the loveliest spots in the world, not far from Geneva, the Jura and Alps Mountains, the famous Castle of Chillon and Lausanne. His parents belonged to the nobility and were highly esteemed. Jean was born in the year 1729.

Wesley states that in his childhood Fletcher had much of the fear of God, and great tenderness of conscience. One day, when he was about seven years of age, he had misbehaved, and his nurse said to him, "You are a naughty boy. Do you know that the devil is to take away all naughty children?" The maid's remark troubled him. He began to pray and did not cease until he believed that God had forgiven him. His conduct was very exemplary from this on. Like Christmas Evans and many others, he had many narrow escapes from death in his youth. Three times he was almost drowned, and once he fell a long distance, but landed on some soft mortar. God preserves the lives of those whom He has chosen for some great work.

Fletcher received a good education and took the highest honors in the University of Geneva. He then went to Lentzburg to study German, Hebrew, and higher mathematics. From his earliest youth he felt a call to preach, but afterwards he abandoned all hope of ever entering the ministry. He says: "I think it was when I was seven years of age, that I first began to feel the love of God shed abroad in my heart, and that I resolved to give myself up to Him, and to the service of His Church, if ever I should be fit for it; but the corruption which is in the world, and that which was in my own heart, soon weakened, if not erased, those first characters which grace had written upon it." Later, he says, " I went through my studies with a design of entering into orders; but, afterwards upon serious reflections, feeling I was unequal to so great a burden, and disgusted with the necessity I should be under to subscribe to the doctrine of predestination, I yielded to the desire of my friends, who would have me go into the army."

It is remarkable that one born in the stronghold of Calvinism, as was Fletcher, should conceive so great a dislike for the principal doctrine of that system of theology, and should become the greatest writer against the Calvinistic system of belief. Although one of so gentle a nature must have revolted at the thought of bloodshed and battle, he chose to become a soldier rather than to preach the doctrines his heart and mind could not endorse. He accepted a captain's commission to fight for Portugal against Brazil, but an accident providentially prevented him from engaging in actual warfare. Just before his ship sailed, a serving maid let the tea kettle fall on his leg, and scalded him so badly that he could not go.

Thus the Lord defeated his purposes. Soon after this his uncle procured a colonel's commission for him in the Dutch army. But his uncle died, and peace was concluded, and the Lord again defeated him in his purposes.

In 1752 Fletcher went to England to learn the English language. He became tutor to the two sons of Thomas Hill, Esq., of Shropshire. It was while thus employed that he became soundly converted to God. A vivid dream he had concerning the final judgment aroused him to see the backslidden condition of his heart. "For some days," says he, "I was so dejected and harassed in mind as to be unable to apply myself to anything. While in this state he heard about the Methodists. He was told that they were a people who did "nothing but pray," and that they were "praying all day and all night," and he resolved to find them. After hearing them he became more and more conscious that some inward change was necessary to make him happy." After hearing a preacher named Green, he was convinced that he did not understand the nature of saving faith, although he had received a premium in the university for his writings on theological and divine subjects.

God opened his eyes more and more to his sinfulness until he wrote in his diary, on January 12, 1755: "All my righteousness is as filthy rags. I am a very devil, though of an inferior sort, and if I am not renewed before I go hence, hell will be my portion to all eternity." He scribes how he went on sinning and repenting, and sinning again; but calling on God's mercy throughout. "On January 21st" says he, "I began to write a confession of my sins, misery, and helplessness, together with a resolution to seek Christ even unto death; but, my illness calling me away I had no heart to go on with it". On Thursday, January 23, his fast-day, he was so tempted, and was so despondent that he almost gave up all hope. "Having continued my supplication till near in the morning," he says, "I then opened my Bible, fell on these words, ' Cast thy burden on the Lord, he shall sustain thee. He will not suffer the righteous to be moved.' Filled with joy, I fell again on my knees to beg of God that I might always cast my burden upon me. I took my Bible again, and fell on these words, ' I will be with thee; fear not, neither be dismayed.' My hope now greatly increased, and I thought I saw myself conqueror over sin, hell, and all manner of affliction. "With this beautiful promise I shut my Bible, and as I shut it I cast my eye on the words, 'Whatsoever ye ask in my name, I will do it.' So having asked perseverance and grace to serve God till death, I went hither to take my rest."

Such is the account of Fletcher's conversion to Christ as related in his diary and gleaned from various letters of his. His widow adds the following, written after his death: "I subjoin what I have heard him speak concerning this time. He still pleaded with the Lord to take a full possession of his heart, and to give a fuller manifestation of His love, till one day, when in earnest prayer and prostrate on his face, he saw, with the eye of faith, the Saviour on the cross, and at the same time these words were spoken with power to his heart: "Seized by the rage of sinful men, I see Christ bound, and bruised, and slain"

Tis done, the Martyr dies! His life to ransom ours is given. And lo ! the fiercest fire of heaven consumes the sacrifice.

He suffers both from men and God; He bears the universal load Of guilt and misery! He suffers to reverse our doom, and lo! my Lord is here become The bread of life to me.

"Now all his bands were broken. His freed soul began to breathe a purer air. Sin was beneath his feet. He could triumph in the Lord. From this time he walked in the ways of God, and, thinking he had not leisure enough in the day, he made it a constant rule to sit up two whole nights in the week for reading, prayer, and meditation."

Fletcher was so humble and so unselfish that he said or wrote but little concerning himself, and it is difficult therefore to give any detailed account of his deeper spiritual experiences. His writings, however, like those of Wesley, abound with teaching concerning perfect love and entire sanctification. Like Wesley, he believed that while men are imperfect in knowledge and in many other ways, it is possible for them to be perfect in love, or to love God with all the strength and intelligence they possess. He believed that the promise of the baptism of the Holy Spirit was for believers today as much as at the day of Pentecost.

Although Fletcher wrote but little concerning himself, his widow wrote a brief account of how he was led into a deeper experience than conversion. Referring to his conversion, she says : "Some time after this he was favored with a further manifestation of the love of God, so powerful, that, he said, it appeared to him as if his body and soul would be separated. Now all his desires centered in one, that of devoting himself to the service of his precious Master, which he thought he could best do by entering holy orders."

The fullest account of how Fletcher obtained this deeper inward experience is given in a letter written by the famous Spirit-filled Hester Ann Rogers. Describing a meeting held in 1781, she says: "When I entered the room, where they were assembled, the heavenly man (Fletcher) was giving out the following verses with such animation as I have seldom witnessed —

"Near us, assisting Jesus, stand;
Give us the opening heavens to see;
Thee to behold at God's right hand,
And yield our parting souls to Thee".

"My Father, O my Father, hear. And send the fiery chariot down;
Let Israel's famous steeds appear. And whirl us to the starry crown.

"We, we would die for Jesus too; Through tortures, fires, and seas of blood;
All triumphantly break through And plunge into the depths of God".

"After this Mr. Fletcher poured out his full soul in prayer, or praise, or spiritual instruction; and every word that fell from his lips appeared to be accompanied with an unction from above. "After dinner, I took an opportunity to beg him to explain an expression he had used in a letter to Miss Loxdale; namely, that, on all who are renewed in love, God bestows the gift of prophecy. He called for the Bible; then read and explained Acts II., observing, that, to prophesy in the sense he meant, was, to magnify God with the new heart of love, and the new tongue of praise, as they did, who, on the day of Pentecost, were filled with the Holy Ghost. He insisted now that believers are called upon to prove the same baptismal fire; that the day of Pentecost was the opening of the dispensation of the Spirit — the great promise of the Father ; and that the latter day glory, which he believed was near at hand, should far exceed the first effusion of the Spirit. Seeing then that they, on the day of Pentecost, bare witness to the grace of our Lord, so shall we ; and, like them, spread the flame of love. " After singing a hymn, he cried, ' O to be filled with the Holy Ghost I I want to be filled! O, my friends, let us wrestle for a more abundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit! 'To me, he said, "My sister, will you covenant with me this day, to pray for the fullness of the Spirit? Will you be a witness for Jesus?" I answered with flowing tears, ' In the strength of Jesus I will.' He cried, 'Glory, glory be to God! Lord, strengthen Thine handmaid to keep this covenant, even unto death!" "He then said, 'My dear brethren and sisters, God is here! I feel Him in this place; but I would hide my face in the dust, because I have been ashamed to declare what He has done for me. For many years, I have grieved His Spirit; I am deeply humbled; and He has again restored my soul. Last Wednesday evening, He spoke to me by these words, 'Reckon yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord'. I obeyed the voice of God; I now obey it; and

tell you all, to the praise of His love — I am freed from sin. Yes, I rejoice to declare it, and to be a witness to the glory of His grace, that I am dead unto sin, and alive unto God, through Jesus Christ, who is my Lord and King! I received this blessing four or five times before; but I lost it, by not observing the order of God; who has told us, 'with the heart man believeth unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation'. But the enemy offered his bait, under various colors, to keep me from a public declaration of what God had wrought. "When I first received this grace, Satan bid me wait awhile, till I saw more of the fruits; I resolved to do so; but I soon began to doubt of the witness and hope which I had felt in my heart and in a little time, I was sensible I had lost both. A second time, after receiving this salvation, I was kept from being a witness for my Lord, by the suggestion, 'Thou art a public character — the eyes of all are upon thee — and if, as before, by any means thou lose the blessing, it will be a dishonor to the doctrine of heart-holiness'. I held my peace, and again forfeited the gift of God. At another time, I was prevailed upon to hide it, by reasoning, 'How few, even of the children of God, will receive this testimony? many of them supposing that every transgression of the Adamic law is sin; and, therefore, if I profess to be free from sin, all these will give my profession the lie; because I am not free in their sense; I am not free from ignorance, mistakes, and various infirmities; I will, therefore, enjoy what God has wrought in me; but I will not say, 'I am perfect in love! Alas! I soon found again. He that hideth his Lord's talent, and improveth it not, from that unprofitable servant shall be taken even that he hath'.

"Now, my brethren, you see my folly. I have confessed it in your presence; and now I resolve before you all to confess my Master. I will confess Him to all the world. And I declare unto you, in the presence of God, the Holy Trinity, I am now dead indeed unto sin. I do not say, 'I am crucified with Christ', because some of our well-meaning brethren say, by this can only be meant gradual dying; but I profess unto you, 'I am dead unto sin, and alive unto God; and, remember, all this is through Jesus Christ our Lord. He is my Prophet, Priest, and King — my indwelling Holiness — my all in all. I wait for the fulfillment of that prayer. 'That all may be one, as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us; and that they may be one, even as we are one'.

"O for that pure baptismal flame! O for the fullness of the dispensation of the Holy Ghost! Pray, pray, pray for this! This shall make us all of one heart, and of one soul. Pray for gifts — for the gift of utterance and confess your royal Master. A man without gifts is like a king in disguise; he appears as a subject only. You are kings and priests unto God! Put on, therefore, your robes, and wear on your garter, holiness to the Lord!"

"A few days after this, I heard Mr. Fletcher preach upon the same subject; inviting all, who felt their need of full redemption, to believe now for this great salvation. He observed, 'As when you reckon with your creditor, or with your host, and, as when you have paid all, you reckon yourselves free, so now reckon with God. Jesus has paid all; He has paid for thee!—He has purchased thy pardon and holiness; therefore, it is now God's command. Reckon thyself dead indeed unto sin; and thou art alive unto God from this hour! O, begin, begin to reckon now! Fear not; believe, believe, believe! and continue to believe every moment! So shalt thou continue free; for it is retained as it is received, by faith alone. And, whosoever thou art that perseveringly believes, it will be as fire in thy bosom, and constrain thee to confess with thy mouth thy Lord and thy King, Jesus, and in spreading the sacred flame of Love thou shalt be saved to the uttermost".

"He also dwelt largely on these words, 'Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.' He asked, 'How did sin abound? Had it not overpowered your whole soul? Were not all your passions, tempers, propensities, inordinate and evil? Did not pride, anger, self-will, and unbelief, all reign over you? And, when the Spirit of God strove with you, did you not repel all His convictions, and put Him far from you?

Well, my brethren, ye were then the servants of sin, and were free from righteousness; but, now, being made free from sin, ye became servants to God; and holiness shall overspread your whole soul, so that all your tempers and passions shall be henceforth regulated and governed by Him who now sitteth upon the throne of your heart, making all things new. As you once resisted the Holy Spirit, so now ye shall have power to resist all the subtle frauds or fierce attacks of Satan."

"Mr. Fletcher then, with lifted hands, cried, ' Who will thus be saved? Who will believe the report? You are only in an improper sense called believers who reject this. Who is a believer ? One who believes a few things which God has spoken? Nay, but one who believes all that ever proceeded out of His mouth. Here then is the word of the Lord: As sin abounded, grace shall much more abound! As no good thing was in you by nature, so now no evil thing shall remain. Do you believe this? Or are you a half believer only? Come! Jesus is offered to thee as a perfect Saviour. Take Him, and He will make thee a perfect saint. O ye half believers, will you still plead for the murderers of your Lord? Which of these will you hide as a serpent in your bosom ? Shall it be anger, pride, self-will, or accursed unbelief 'i O be no longer befooled! Bring these enemies to thy Lord, and let Him slay them.' "

The above words of Mrs. Rogers give us a glimpse of the deeper inward experiences of the sainted Fletcher, although his own modesty prevented him from giving any detailed account of the marvelous manifestations of God's Spirit to him, and through him. He walked and talked and lived in the Spirit as few others have done. He shrank from publicity and controversy, and was one of the most retiring of men. Fletcher was a great student of prophecy, and a firm believer in the pre-millennial coming of Christ. He was very abstemious in diet, eating very little and only vegetables, butter, and milk. Every moment of his time was employed in some useful manner, and he conversed but little except on Christian subjects.

About the year 1756 Fletcher joined the Methodists, and soon after he began to think seriously of entering the ministry. In 1757 he was ordained as a priest in the Church of England, and from this time forward he became Wesley's greatest helper and co-laborer. For three years he preached with great unction and power in the Methodist Societies and wherever God opened a door for him. Occasionally he had an opportunity of preaching in a State Church, but his preaching against sin was so bold that the people were aghast and astonished at him; but he was already becoming famous as a preacher, and was a great favorite with the Wesleys, Whitefield, the Countess of Huntington, and the Methodists generally. Finally, in 1760, he became vicar of the Anglican Church at Madeley, which position he held until his death. The first ten years at Madeley were spent in preaching, visiting among his people, and in a profound study of theology and religious works of all kinds. It was just the preparation Fletcher needed to make him the powerful defender of Methodism which he afterwards became. John Wesley opposed his settling down at Madeley, but later probably saw the wisdom of it. After 1765 Methodist Societies were formed in the neighborhood of Madeley, and Fletcher frequently preached for them. Enormous crowds flocked to hear him, and the buildings would seldom contain the people. In 1765 he visited Bath and Bristol, preaching in the large meeting-houses belonging to the Countess of Huntington. She wrote concerning his preaching, "Deep and awful are the impressions made on every hand. Dear Mr. Fletcher's preaching is truly apostolic."

When about forty years of age he visited his home in Switzerland, and preached with power to the descendants of the Albigenses, and to other congregations. Everywhere he was regarded as almost super-human. An old Swiss wept because Fletcher could not remain longer. "Oh, sir, said he, "how unfortunate for my country! During my lifetime it has produced but one angel of a man, and now it is our lot to lose him!" Fletcher also visited Italy in 1770, and with bared head and almost seraphic countenance he walked along the Appian Way on which Paul trod as a prisoner on his way to Rome. In 1776 Fletcher made an evangelistic tour in Britain with the Wesleys.

For some time Fletcher was president of Trevecca College, the college founded by the Countess of Huntington for training young men for the ministry. There he was regarded as almost an angel. Mr. Benson, the head master says, "He was received as an angel of God. It is impossible for me to describe the veneration in which we all held him." He also describes how when Fletcher visited, he laid aside everything to listen to him as he told them how that being filled with the Spirit was a better qualification for the ministry than classical learning. He then spent hours on his knees praying for the students to be filled with the Holy Ghost. On one of these occasions he was so overwhelmed with the Holy Spirit's power that he cried out, "O my God, withhold Thy hand, or the vessel will burst!" but he afterwards felt that he should have prayed for God to enlarge the vessel.

In 1771 the great controversy arose between those who held the Calvinistic views of theology and those who held the Arminian, and Fletcher became the great defender of the Arminian views held by the Methodists. Wesley was too busy with the care of all the Methodist Societies to devote much time to the controversy, but Fletcher defended the Methodist theology in a way which left little to be desired, and the kindly spirit in which he did it caused a better feeling among all parties concerned. In his great work entitled "Checks to Antinomianism " Fletcher so harmonized the passages of Scripture on predestination, or election, and those on man's free agency and moral responsibility as to show that they in no way contradict each other. This book still remains one of the greatest bulwarks of Methodist theology ever produced.

The Methodist preachers in the Conference burst into tears, and Wesley was deeply moved when, in 1784, Fletcher requested to be placed on the roll of supernumerary ministers. The year following, he departed this life after resting as in sleep for twenty-four hours. It must not be supposed that so holy a man as Fletcher had no temptations. He told Wesley how Satan had often tempted him to put an end to his own life. He was so passionate by nature that he often plead and prayed the whole night to get victory over his temper, and sometimes lay prone upon the floor in an agony of grief as he plead with God for the victory ; and yet he was famous for his gentleness. In his Life of Fletcher, Wesley says: "For twenty years and upwards before his death, no one ever saw him out of temper, or heard him utter a rash expression, on any provocation whatever".