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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 133

On the Death of Rev. Mr. John Fletcher

PREACHED ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEATH OF THE REV. MR. JOHN FLETCHER VICAR
OF MADELEY, SHROPSHIRE

TO THE READER It was a consciousness of my own inability to describe in a manner worthy of the subject such a person as Mr. Fletcher, which was one great reason of my not writing this sooner. I judged only an Apelles was proper to paint an Alexander. But I at length submitted to importunity, and hastily put together some memorials of this great man; intending, if God permit, when I have more leisure and more materials, to write a fuller account of his life. London, Nov. 9, 1785 John Wesley

"Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: For the end of that man is peace." Ps. 37:37.

In the preceding verses, taken together with this, there is a beautiful contrast between the death of a wicked and that of a good man. "I myself," says the Psalmist, "have seen the ungodly in great power, and flourishing like a green bay tree. I went by and lo, he was gone: I sought him, but his place could nowhere be found." Dost thou desire to be found happy, both in life and in death Then "keep innocency, and take heed unto the thing that is right; for that shall bring a man peace at the last." The words are rendered in the new translation, with far more force and elegance: "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: For the end of that man is peace." It is not improbable that David, while he uttered these words, had a particular instance before his eyes. Such an instance was that of the great and good man whom God has not long ago taken to himself.

In discoursing on these words I purpose, First, briefly to inquire, Who is the person that is here spoken of, "the perfect, the upright man." I will endeavour, Secondly, to explain the promise, "That shall bring a man peace at the last;" or, as it is expressed in the other version, "The end of that man is peace." I will then, with the divine assistance, show a little more at large, in how glorious a manner it was fulfilled in the end of that "perfect and upright man" who has been lately removed from us.

1. I am, First, briefly to inquire who is the person that is here spoken of, "the upright and perfect man." In speaking on this head, I shall not endeavour to describe the character of an upright Jew, such as David himself was, or any of those holy men that lived under the Mosaic dispensation: It more nearly imports us to consider such an upright man as are those that live under the Christian dispensation; such as have lived and died since "life and immortality" have been "brought to light by the gospel."

2. In this sense, he is a perfect and upright man who believes in the name of the Son of God; he is one in whom it has pleased the Father to reveal the Son of his love, and who, consequently, is able to declare, "The life that I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God; who loved me, and gave himself for me." He is one that finds "the Spirit of God witnessing with his spirit, that he is a child of God," and unto whom Jesus Christ is made of God "wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption."

3. This faith will undoubtedly work by love. Accordingly, every Christian believer has "the love of God shed abroad in his heart, by the Holy Ghost which is given unto him." And, loving God, he loves his brother also; his good-will extends to every child of man. By this, as well as by the fruits of love, - lowliness, meekness, and resignation, -- he shows that there is the same "mind in him which was in

Christ Jesus."

4. As to his outward behaviour, the upright Christian believer is blameless and unreprouable. He is holy, as Christ that has called him is holy, in all manner of conversation; ever labouring to "have a conscience void of offence toward God and toward man." He not only avoids all outward sin, but "abstains from all appearance of evil." He steadily walks in all the public and private ordinances of the Lord blameless. He is zealous of good works; as he hath time, doing good, in every kind and degree, to all men. And in the whole course of his life he pursues one invariable rule, -- "whether he eats or drinks, or whatever he does, to do all to the glory of God.

II. And surely "the end of this man is peace;" the meaning of which words we are now, in the Second place, to consider.

I do not conceive this immediately to refer to that glorious peace which is prepared for him in the presence of God to all eternity; but rather to that which he will enjoy in the present world, before his spirit returns to God that gave it. Neither does it seem directly to refer to outward peace, or deliverance from outward trouble; although it is true, many good men, who have been long buffeted by adversity, and troubled on every side, have experienced an entire deliverance from it, and enjoyed a remarkable calm before they went hence. But this seems chiefly to refer to inward peace; even that "peace of God which passeth all understanding." Therefore it is no wonder that it cannot be fully and adequately expressed in human language. We can only say, it is an unspeakable calmness and serenity of spirit, a tranquillity in the blood of Christ, which keeps the souls of believers, in their latest hour, even as a garrison keeps a city; which keeps not only their hearts, all their passions and affections, but also their minds, all the motions of their understanding and imagination, and all the workings of their reason, in Christ Jesus. This peace they experienced in a higher or lower degree, (suppose they continued in the faith,) from the time they first found redemption in the blood of Jesus, even the forgiveness of sins. But when they have nearly finished their course, it generally flows as a river, even in such a degree as it had not before entered into their hearts to conceive. A remarkable instance of this, out of a thousand, occurred many years ago: -- Enoch Williams, one of the first of our Preachers that was stationed at Cork, (who had received this peace when he was eleven years old, and never lost it for an hour,) after he had rejoiced in God with joy unspeakable during the whole course of his illness, was too much exhausted to speak many words, but just said, "Peace! peace!" and died.

III. So was the Scripture fulfilled. But it was far more gloriously fulfilled in that late eminent servant of God; as will clearly appear if we consider a few circumstances, First, of his life, and Secondly, of his triumphant death.

1. Indeed we have, as yet, but a very imperfect knowledge of his life. We know little more of his early years, than that he was from his infancy so remarkably regardless of food, that he would scarce take enough to sustain life; and that he had always much of the fear of God, and a real sense of religion. He was born September 12, in the year 1729, at Nyon, in Switzerland, of a very reputable family. He went through the usual course of academical studies in the University of Geneva. One of his uncles, who was at that time a General Officer in the Imperial service, then invited him into the same service, promising to procure him a commission. But just as he came into Germany, the war was at an end. Being so far on his way, he was then invited into Holland by another uncle, who had, a little before been desired by a correspondent in England to procure a tutor for a gentleman's sons. He asked Mr. Fletcher whether he was willing to go into England and undertake this office. He consented, and accordingly went over to England, and undertook the care of Mr. Hill's two sons, at Tern, in

Shropshire; and he continued in that office till the young gentlemen went to the University.

2. When Mr. Hill went up to London, to attend the Parliament, he took his lady and Mr. Fletcher with him. While they were dining at St. Alban's, he walked out into the town, but did not return till the coach was set out for London. However, a saddle-horse being left, he came after, and overtook them on the same evening. Mrs. Hill asking him why he stayed behind, he said, "I was walking through the market-place, and I heard a poor old woman talk so sweetly of Jesus Christ, that I knew not how the time past away." "I will be hanged," said Mrs. Hill, "if our tutor does not turn Methodist by and by!" "Methodist, Madam," said he, "pray what is that" She replied, "Why, the Methodists are a people that do nothing but pray. They are praying all day and all night." "Are they" said he, "then, with the help of God, I will find them out, if they be above ground." He did, not long after, find them out, and had his desire, being admitted into the society. While he was in town, he met in Mr. Richard Edwards's class, and lost no opportunity of meeting. And he retained a peculiar regard for Mr. Edwards to the day of his death.

3. It was not long before he was pressed in spirit to call sinners to repentance. Seeing the world all around him lying in wickedness, he found an earnest desire

To pluck poor brands out of the fire, To snatch them from the verge of hell.

And though he was yet far from being perfect in the English tongue, particularly with regard to the pronunciation of it, yet the earnestness with which he spake, seldom to be seen in England, and the unspeakably tender affection to poor, lost sinners which breathed in every word and gesture, made so deep an impression on all that heard that very few went empty away.

4. About the year 1753, (being now of a sufficient age,) he was ordained Deacon and Priest, and soon after presented to the little living of Madeley, in Shropshire. This, he had frequently said, was the only living which he ever desired to have. He was ordained at Whitehall, and the same day, being informed that I had no one to assist me at West-street chapel, he came away as soon as ever the ordination was over, and assisted me in the administration of the Lord's Supper. And he was now doubly diligent in preaching, not only in the chapels of West-street and Spitalfields, but wherever the providence of God opened a door to proclaim the everlasting gospel. This he did frequently in French, (as well as in English,) of which all judges allowed him to be a complete master.

5. Hence he removed into the Vicarage-house at Madeley. Here he was fully employed among his parishioners, both in the town and in Madeley-Wood, a mile or two from it, -- a place much resembling Kingswood, almost wholly inhabited by poor colliers [coal miners], and their numerous families. These forlorn ones (little wiser than the beasts that perish) he took great pains to reform and instruct. And they are now as judicious and as well-behaved a people as most of their station in the three kingdoms.

6. But after some time he was prevailed upon by the Countess of Huntingdon to leave his beloved retreat, and remove into Wales, in order to superintend her school at Trevecka. This he did with all his power, instructing the young men both in learning and philosophy; till he received a letter from the Countess, together with the circular letter signed by Mr. Shirley, summoning all that feared God in England to meet together at Bristol at the time of the Methodist Conference, "in order to bear testimony against the "dreadful heresy" contained in the Minutes of the preceding Conference." Her Ladyship declared, that all who did not absolutely renounce those eight propositions which were

contained in the Minutes of that Conference must immediately leave her house. Mr. Fletcher was exceedingly surprised at this peremptory declaration. He spent the next day in fasting and prayer, and in the evening wrote to her Ladyship that he not only could not utterly renounce, but must entirely approve of, all those eight propositions; and therefore had obeyed her order, by leaving her house and returning to his own at Madeley.

7. That circular letter was the happy occasion of his writing those excellent "Checks to Antinomianism," in which one knows not which to admire most, the purity of the language, (such as a foreigner scarce ever wrote before,) the strength and clearness of the argument, or the mildness and sweetness of the spirit which breathes throughout the whole; insomuch that I nothing wonder at a clergyman that was resolved never to part with his dear decrees, who, being pressed to read them, replied, "No, I will never read Mr. Fletcher's writings; for if I did, I should be of his mind." He now likewise wrote several other valuable tracts. Meantime, he was more abundant in his ministerial labours, both in public and private; visiting his whole parish, early and late, in all weathers; regarding neither heat nor cold, rain nor snow, whether he was on horseback or on foot. But this insensibly weakened his constitution, and sapped the foundation of his health; which was still more effectually done by his intense and uninterrupted studies, at which he frequently continued with scarce any intermission, fourteen, fifteen, or sixteen hours a day. Meantime, he did not allow himself necessary food. He seldom took any regular meals, unless he had company; but twice or thrice in four and twenty hours ate some bread and cheese, or fruit; instead of which he sometimes took a draught of milk, and then wrote on again. When one reproved him for this, for not allowing himself a sufficiency of necessary food, he replied, with surprise, "Not allow myself food Why, our food seldom costs my housekeeper and me less than two shillings a week!"

8. Being informed that his health was greatly impaired, I judged nothing was so likely to restore it as a long journey: So I proposed his taking a journey with me into Scotland, to which he willingly consented. We set out in spring, and after travelling eleven or twelve hundred miles, returned to London in autumn. I verily believe, had he travelled with me a few months longer, he would have quite recovered his health; but being stopped by his friends, he quickly relapsed, and fell into a true pulmonary consumption.

9. But this sickness was not unto death; it was only sent that the glory of the Lord might appear. During the whole course of it, he remained at Newington, and was visited by persons of all ranks; and they all marvelled at the grace of God that was in him. In all his pain, no complaint came out of his mouth; but his every breath was spent, either in praising God, or exhorting and comforting his neighbour.

10. When nothing else availed, he was advised to take a journey by sea and by land into his own country. He did this in company with Mr. Ireland, a well-tryed and faithful friend, who loved him as a brother, and thought no pains ill bestowed, if he could preserve so valuable a life. He resided in his own country about a year, and was a blessing to all that were round about him. Being much recovered, he spent some months in France, and then returned in perfect health to Madeley.

11. In the year 1781, with the full approbation of all his friends, he married Miss Bosanquet; of whom, as she is still alive, I say no more at present, than that she was the only person in England whom I judged to be worthy of Mr. Fletcher. By her tender and judicious care his health was confirmed more and more; and I am firmly convinced, that had he used this health in travelling all over the kingdom, five, or six, or seven months every year, (for which never was man more eminently qualified; no, not

Mr. Whitefield himself,) he would have done more good than any other man in England. I cannot doubt but this would have been the more excellent way. However, though he did not accept of this honour, he did abundance of good in that narrower sphere of action which he chose; and was a pattern well worthy the imitation of all the parochial Ministers in the kingdom.

12. His manner of life during the time that he and his wife lived together, it may be most satisfactory to give in her own words: --

"It is no little grief to me that my dearly beloved husband has left no account of himself in writing; and I am not able to give many particulars of a life the most angelical I have ever known.

"He was born at Nyon, in the Canton of Berne, in Switzerland. In his infancy he discovered a lively genius, and great tenderness of heart. One day, having offended his father, who threatened to correct him, he kept himself at a distance in the garden, till, seeing his father approach, and fearing his anger would be renewed by the sight of him he ran away; but he was presently struck with a deep remorse, thinking, 'What! Do I run away from my father What a wicked wretch! It may be, I may live to grow up and have a son that will run away from me!' And it was some years before the impression of sorrow, then made upon him, wore off.

"When he was about seven years old, he was reproved by his nurse-maid saying, 'You are a naughty boy, and the devil takes all such.' After he was in bed, he began to reflect on her words: His heart smote him, and he said, 'I am a naughty boy; and perhaps God will let the devil fetch me away.' He got up on the bed and for a considerable time wrestled with God in prayer; till he felt such a sense of the love of God as made him quite easy."

Part of the next paragraph I omit, being nearly the same with what I inserted before.

"When he entered Mr. Hill's family, he did not know Christ in his heart. One Sunday evening, as he was writing some music, the servant came in to make up the fire, and, looking at him said, 'Sir, I am very sorry to see you so employed on the Lord's day.' He immediately put away his music, and from that hour, became a strict observer of that holy day.

"Not long after, he met with a person who asked him to go with her and hear the Methodists. He readily consented. The more he heard, the more uneasy he grew; and, doubling his diligence, he hoped by doing much to render himself acceptable to God; till one day hearing Mr. Green, he was convinced he did not know what true faith was. This occasioned many reflections in his mind. 'Is it possible,' said he, 'that I, who have made divinity my study, and have received the premium of piety (so called) from the University for my writings on divine subjects, -- that I should still be so ignorant as not to know what faith is' But the more he examined, the more he was convinced: Then sin revived, and hope died away. He now sought by the most rigorous austerities, to conquer an evil nature, and bring heaven-born peace into his soul. But the more he struggled, the more he was convinced that all his fallen soul was sin; and that nothing but a revelation of the love of Jesus could make him a Christian. For this he groaned with unwearied assiduity; till one day, after much wrestling with God, lying prostrate on his face before the throne, he felt the application of the blood of Jesus. Now his bonds were broken, and his free soul began to breathe a pure air. Sin was beneath his feet, and he could triumph in the Lord, the God of his salvation.

"From this time he walked valiantly 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 nights in a week for reading, prayer, and meditation; in order to sink deeper" into that communion with God which was become his soul's delight. Meantime he took only vegetable food; and for above six months, lived wholly on bread, with milk-and-water.

"Notwithstanding the nights he sat up, he made it a rule never to sleep as long as he could possibly keep awake. For this purpose he always took a candle and book to bed with him; but one night, being overcome of sleep before he had put out the candle, he dreamed his curtains, pillow, and cap were on fire, without doing him any harm. And so it was: In the morning part of his curtains, pillow, and cap were burnt. But not an hair of his head was singed. So did God give his angels charge over him!

"Some time after, he was favoured with a particular manifestation of the love of God; so powerful, that it appeared to him as if body and soul would be separated. Now all his desires centred in one, that of devoting himself to the service of his precious Master. This he thought he could do best by entering into Orders. God made his way plain, and he soon after settled in Madeley. He received this parish as from the immediate hand of God, and unweariedly laboured therein, and in the adjacent places, till he had spent himself in his Master's service, and was ripening fast for glory. Much opposition he met with for many years, and often his life was in danger. Sometimes he was inwardly constrained to warn obstinate sinners that if they did not repent, the hand of God would cut them off. And the event proved the truth of the prediction. But, notwithstanding all their opposition, many were the seals of his ministry.

"He had an earnest desire that the pure gospel should remain among his people after he was taken away. For this purpose he surmounted great difficulties in building the house in Madeley-Wood. He not only saved for it the last farthing he had, but when he was abroad, proposed to let the Vicarage-house; designing at his return, to live in a little cottage near it, and appropriating the rent of it for clearing that house.

"Since the time I had the honour and happiness of living with him, every day made me more sensible of the mighty work of the Spirit upon him. The fruits of this were manifest in all his life and conversation; but in nothing more than in his meekness and humility. It was a meekness which no affront could move; an humility which loved to be unknown, forgotten, and despised. [I think this was going to an extreme.] How hard is it to find an eminent person who loves an equal! But his delight was in preferring others to himself. It appeared so natural in him, that it seemed as his meat to set everyone before himself. He spake not of the fault of an absent person but when necessary; and then with the utmost caution. He made no account of his own labours; and perhaps carried to an extreme his dislike of hearing them mentioned.

"Patience is the daughter of humility. In him it discovered itself in a manner which I wish I could either describe or imitate. It produced in him a ready mind to embrace every cross with alacrity and pleasure. And for the good of his neighbour, (the poor in particular,) nothing seemed hard, nothing wearisome. When I have been grieved to call him out of his study, from his closet-work, two or three times in an hour, he would answer, "O, my dear, never think of that; it matters not what we do, so we are always ready to meet the will of God; it is only conformity to this which makes any employment excellent."

"He had a singular love for the lambs of the flock, -- the children; and applied himself with the greatest diligence to their instruction, for which he had a peculiar gift: and this populous parish found him full exercise for it. The poorest met with the same attention from him as the rich. For their sakes

he almost grudged himself necessities, and often expressed a pain in using them, while any of his parish wanted them.

"But while I mention his meekness and love, let me not forget the peculiar favour of his Master in giving him the most firm and resolute courage. In reprovng sin and daring sinners, he was a "son of thunder;" and regarded neither fear nor favour, when he had a message from God to deliver.

"With respect to his communion with God, it is much to be lamented that we have no account of it from his own pen. But thus far I can say, it was his constant care to keep an uninterrupted sense of the divine presence. In order to this he was slow of speech, and had the exactest government of his words. To this he was so inwardly attentive, as sometimes to appear stupid to those who knew him not; though few conversed in a more lively manner when he judged it would be for the glory of God. It was his continual endeavour to draw up his own and every other spirit to an immediate intercourse with God; and all his intercourse with me was so mingled with prayer and praise, that every employment and every meal, was, as it were, perfumed therewith. He often said, 'It is a very little thing so to hang upon God by faith as to feel no departure from him. But I want to be filled with the fullness of his Spirit.' 'I feel,' said he, 'sometimes such gleams of light, as it were wafts of heavenly air, as seem ready to take my soul with them to glory.' A little before his last illness, when the fever began to rage among us, he preached a sermon on the duty of visiting the sick, wherein he said: 'What do you fear Are you afraid of catching the distemper and dying! O, fear it no more! What an honour to die in your Master's work! If permitted to me, I should account it a singular favour.' In his former illness he wrote thus: 'I calmly wait, in unshaken resignation, for the full salvation of God; ready to venture on his faithful love, and on the sure mercies of David. His time is best, and is my time. Death has lost its sting; and, I bless God, I know not what hurry of spirits is, or unbelieving fears.'

"For his last months, he scarce ever lay down or rose up without these words in his mouth: --

I nothing have, I nothing am; My treasure's in the bleeding Lamb, Both now and evermore.

"In one of the letters which he wrote some time since to his dear people of Madeley, some of his words are, "I leave this blessed island for awhile, but I trust I shall never leave the kingdom of God, -- the shadow of Christ's cross, -- the clefts of the Rock, smitten and pierced for us. There I meet you in spirit; thence, I trust, I shall joyfully leap into the ocean of eternity, to go and join those ministering spirits who wait on the heirs of salvation. And if I am no more allowed to minister to you on earth, I rejoice at the thought that I shall perhaps be allowed to accompany the angels who, if you abide in the faith, will be commissioned to carry you into Abraham's bosom.'

"The thought enlivens my faith! Lord give me to walk in his steps! Then shall I see him again, and my heart shall rejoice, and we shall eternally behold the Lamb together. Faith brings near the welcome moment! And now he beckons me away, and Jesus bids me come!"

I know not that anything can or need be added to this, but Mrs. Fletcher's account of his death, which follows also in her own words: --

"For some time before his late illness he was particularly penetrated with the nearness of eternity. There was scarce an hour in which he was not calling upon us to drop every thought and every care, that we might attend to nothing but drinking deeper into God. We spent much time in wrestling with God, and were led in a peculiar manner to abandon our whole selves into the hands of God, to do or

suffer whatever was pleasing to him.

On Thursday, August 4, he was employed in the work of God from three in the afternoon till nine at night. When he came home he said, 'I have taken cold.' On Friday and Saturday he was not well, but seemed uncommonly drawn out in prayer. On Saturday night his fever appeared very strong. I begged him not to go to church in the morning; but he told me, 'It was the will of the Lord;' in which case I never dared to persuade. In reading Prayers, he almost fainted away. I got through the crowd and entreated him to come out of the desk. But he let me and others know, in his sweet manner, that we were not to interrupt the order of God. I then retired to my pew, where all around me were in tears. When he was a little refreshed by the windows being opened, he went on; and then preached with a strength and recollection that surprised us all.

"After sermon he went up to the communion-table with these words, 'I am going to throw myself under the wings of the cherubim, before the mercy-seat.' The service held till near two. Sometimes he could scarce stand, and was often obliged to stop. The people were deeply affected; weeping was on every side. Gracious Lord! how was it my soul was kept so calm in the midst of the most tender feelings. Notwithstanding his extreme weakness, he gave out several verses of hymns, and lively sentences of exhortation. When service was over, we hurried him to bed, where he immediately fainted away. He afterward dropped into a sleep for some time, and, on waking, cried out, with a pleasant smile, 'Now, my dear, thou seest I am no worse for doing the Lord's work: He never fails me when I trust in him.'" Having got a little dinner, he dozed most of the evening, now and then waking full of the praises of God. At night his fever returned, though not violent; but his strength decreased amazingly. On Monday and Tuesday we had a little paradise together: He lay on a couch in the study, and, though often changing posture, was sweetly pleasant, and frequently slept a good while. When awake he delighted in hearing me read hymns and tracts on faith and love. His words were all animating, and his patience beyond expression. When he had any nauseous medicines to take, he seemed to enjoy the cross, according to a word he used often to repeat, that we are to seek a perfect conformity to the will of God, and leave him to give us what comfort he saw good. I asked him, whether he had any advice to leave me, if he should be taken from me: He replied, 'I have nothing particular to say: The Lord will open all before thee.' I said, 'Have you any conviction that God is about to take you?' He said, 'No; not in particular; only I always see death so inexpressibly near that we both seem to stand on the very verge of eternity.' While he slept a little I besought the Lord, if it was his good pleasure, to spare him to me a little longer; but my prayer seemed to have no wings, and I could not help mingling continually therewith, 'Lord, give me perfect resignation.' This uncertainty made me tremble, lest God was going to put into my hand the bitter cup which he lately threatened my husband. Some weeks before, I myself was ill of the fever. My husband then felt the whole parting scene, and struggled for perfect resignation. He said: 'O Polly, shall I ever see the day when thou must be carried out to bury? How will the little things which thy tender care has prepared for me in every part of the house, -- how will they wound and distress me! How is it I think I feel jealousy! I am jealous of the worms. I seem to shrink at giving my dear Polly to the worms!'

"Now all these reflections returned upon my heart with the weight of a millstone. I cried to the Lord, and those words were deeply impressed on my spirit, "Where I am, there shall my servants be, that they may behold my glory.' This promise was full of comfort to my soul. I saw that in Christ's immediate presence was our home, and that we should find our re-union in being deeply centred in him. I received it as a fresh marriage for eternity. As such I trust for ever to hold it. All that day, whenever I thought of that expression, 'to behold my glory,' it seemed to wipe away every tear, and

was as the ring whereby we were joined anew.

"Awaking some time after he said: `Polly, I have been thinking it was Israel's fault that they asked for signs. We will not do so; but abandoning our whole selves into the hands of God, we will lie patiently before him, assured that he will do all things well.'

"`My dear love,' said I, `if ever I have done or said anything to grieve thee, how will the remembrance wound my heart, shouldst thou be taken from me!'

"He entreated and charged me, with inexpressible tenderness, not to allow the thought; declaring his thankfulness for our union, in a variety of words written on my heart as with the adamant pen of friendship, deeply dipped in blood.

"On Wednesday, after groaning all day under the weight of the power of God, he told me he had received such a manifestation of the full meaning of those words, `God is love,' as he could never be able to tell. `It fills me,' said he, `every moment. O Polly, my dear Polly, God is love! Shout, shout aloud! I want a gust of praise to go to the ends of the earth! But it seems as if I could not speak much longer. Let us fix on a sign between ourselves;' (tapping me twice with his fingers;) `-- now I mean, God is love; and we will draw each other into God. Observe! By this we will draw each other into God!"

"Sally coming in, he cried out: "O Sally, God is love! Shout, both of you. I want to hear you shout his praise.' All this time, the medical friend, who diligently attended him hoped he was in no danger; as he had no bad head-ache, much sleep, without the least delirium, and an almost regular pulse. So was the disease, though commissioned to take his life, restrained by the power of God!

"On Thursday his speech began to fail. While he was able, he spoke to all that came in his way. Hearing a stranger was in the house, he ordered her to be called up, though uttering two sentences almost made him faint. To his friendly doctor he would not be silent while he had any power of speech; saying, `O Sir, you take much thought for my body; give me leave to take thought for your soul.' When I could scarce understand anything he said, I spoke these words, `God is love.' Instantly, as if all his powers were awakened, he broke out in a rapture, `God is love! love! love! O for that gust of praise I want to sound!' -- Here his voice again failed. He suffered many ways, but with such patience as none but those then present can conceive. If I named his sufferings, he would smile, and make the sign.

"On Friday, finding his body covered with spots, I felt a sword pierce through my soul. As I was kneeling by his side, with my hand in his, entreating the Lord to be with us in this tremendous hour, he strove to say many things, but could not; pressing my hand, and often repeating the sign. At last he breathed out, `Head of the Church, be Head to my wife!' When, for a few moments, I was forced to leave him, Sally said to him, `My dear master, do you know me' He replied, `Sally, God will put his right hand under you.' She added, `O my dear master, should you be taken away, what a disconsolate creature will my poor dear mistress be!' He replied, `God will be her all in all.' He had always delighted much in these words, --

Jesu's blood, through earth and skies, Mercy, free, boundless mercy! cries.

Whenever I repeated them to him he would answer, "Boundless! boundless! boundless!" He now

added, though with great difficulty,

Mercy's full power I soon shall prove, Loved with an everlasting love.

"On Saturday afternoon his fever seemed quite off; and a few friends standing near the bed, he reached his hand to each, and, looking on a Minister, said, 'Are you ready to assist to-morrow' His recollection surprised us, as the day of the week had not been named in his room. Many believed he would recover; and one said, 'Do you think the Lord will raise you up' He strove to answer, saying, 'Raise me in the resur' -- meaning in the resurrection. To another, asking the same question, he said, 'I leave it all to God.'

"In the evening the fever returned with violence, and the mucus falling on his throat almost strangled him. It was supposed the same painful emotion would grow more and more violent to the last. As I felt this exquisitely, I cried to the Lord to remove it; and, glory be to his name, he did. From that time, it returned no more. As night drew on, I perceived him dying very fast. His fingers could hardly make the sign (which he scarce ever forgot,) and his speech seemed quite gone. I said, 'My dear creature, I ask not for myself, I know thy soul; but for the sake of others, if Jesus is very present with thee, lift thy right hand.' He did. 'If the prospect of glory sweetly opens before thee, repeat the sign.' He immediately raised it again; and, in half a minute, a second time: He then threw it up, as if he would reach the top of the bed. After this, his dear hands moved no more; but on my saving, 'Art thou in much pain' he answered, 'No.' From this time, he lay in a kind of sleep, though with his eyes open and fixed. For the most part he sat upright against pillows, with his head a little inclining to one side; and so remarkably composed and triumphant was his countenance, that the least trace of death was scarce discernible in it.

"Twenty-four hours he was in this situation, breathing like a person in common sleep. About thirty-five minutes past ten, on Sunday night, August 14th, his precious soul entered into the joy of his Lord, without one struggle or groan, in the fifty-sixth year of his age.

"And here I break off my mournful story: But on my bleeding heart the fair picture of his heavenly excellence will be for ever drawn. When I call to mind his ardent zeal, his laborious endeavours to seek and save the lost, his diligence in the employment of his time, his Christ-like condescension toward me, and his uninterrupted converse with heaven, -- I may well be allowed to add, my loss is beyond the power of words to paint. I have gone through deep waters; but all my afflictions were nothing compared to this. Well: I want no pleasant prospect, but upwards; nor anything whereon to fix my hope, but immortality.

"On the 17th, [18th] his dear remains were deposited in Madeley churchyard, amid the tears and lamentations of thousands. The service was performed by the Rev. Mr. Hatton, Rector of Waters-Upton, whom God enabled to speak in a pathetic manner to his weeping flock. In the conclusion, at my request, he read the following paper:

"As it was the desire of my beloved husband to be buried in this plain manner, so, out of tenderness he begged that I might not be present: And in all things I would obey him.

"Permit me then, by the mouth of a friend, to bear my open testimony, to the glory of God, that I who have known him in the most perfect manner, am constrained to declare, that I never knew anyone walk so closely in the ways of God as he did. The Lord gave him a conscience tender as the apple of an eye.

He literally preferred the interest of everyone to his own.

"He was rigidly just, but perfectly loose from all attachment to the world. He shared his all with the poor, who lay so close to his heart that at the approach of death, when he could not speak without difficulty, he cried out: `O my poor! what will become of my poor' He was blessed with so great a degree of humility, as is scarce to be found. I am witness, how often he has rejoiced in being treated with contempt. Indeed, it seemed the very food of his soul to be little and unknown. When he desired me to write a line to his brother, if he died; I replying, `I will write him all the Lord's dealings with thee;' `No, no," said he, `write nothing about me. I only desire to be forgotten. God is all.'

His zeal for souls I need not tell you. Let the labours of twenty-five years and a martyr's death in the conclusion, imprint it on your hearts. His diligent visitation of the sick occasioned the fever which, by God's commission, tore him from you and me. And his vehement desire to take his last leave of you, with dying lips and hands, gave, it is supposed, the finishing stroke, by preparing his blood for putrefaction. Thus has he lived and died your servant; and will any of you refuse to meet him at God's right hand in that day

"He walked with death always in sight. About two months ago he came to me and said, `My dear love, I know not how it is, but I have a strange impression death is very near us, as if it would be some sudden stroke upon one of us. And it draws out all my soul in prayer, that we may be ready.' He then broke out: `Lord, prepare the soul thou wilt call! And Oh, stand by the poor disconsolate one that shall be left behind!'

"A few days before his departure, he was filled with love in an uncommon manner; saying to me, `I have had such a discovery of the depth of that word, God is love, I cannot tell thee half. O shout his praise!' The same he testified, as long as he had a voice, and continued to testify to the end, by a most lamb-like patience, in which he smiled over death, and set his last seal to the glorious truths he had so long preached among you.

"Three years, nine months, and two days, I have possessed my heavenly- minded husband; but now the sun of my earthly joy is set for ever, and my soul filled with an anguish which only finds its consolation in a total resignation to the will of God. When I was asking the Lord, if he pleased, to spare him to me a little longer, the following promise was impressed on my mind with great power: (In the accomplishment of which I look for our re-union:) -- `Where I am, there shall my servants be, that they may behold my glory.' Lord, hasten the hour.

There is little need of adding any farther character of this man of God to the foregoing account, given by one who wrote out of the fullness of her heart. I would only observe, that for many years I despaired of finding any inhabitant of Great Britain, that could stand in any degree of comparison with Gregory Lopez or Monsieur de Renty. But let any impartial person judge, if Mr. Fletcher was at all inferior to them. Did he not experience as deep communion with God, and as high a measure of inward holiness, as was experienced either by one or the other of those burning and shining lights And it is certain his outward holiness shone before men with full as bright a lustre as theirs. But if any should attempt to draw a parallel between them, there are two circumstances that deserve consideration. One is, we are not assured that the writers of their lives did not extenuate, if not suppress, what was amiss in them; and some things amiss we are assured there were, viz., many touches of superstition, and some of idolatry, in worshipping saints, the Virgin Mary in particular: But I have not suppressed or extenuated anything in Mr. Fletcher's character; for, indeed, I knew nothing that was amiss, -- nothing that needed

to be extenuated, much less suppressed. A second circumstance is, that the writers of their lives could not have so full a knowledge of them, as both Mrs. Fletcher and I had of Mr. Fletcher; being eye and ear witnesses of his whole conduct. Consequently, we know that his life was not sullied with any mixture of either idolatry or superstition. I was intimately acquainted with him for above thirty years; I conversed with him morning, noon, and night, without the least reserve, during a journey of many hundred miles. And in all that time I never heard him speak one improper word nor saw him do an improper action. -- To conclude: Many exemplary men have I known, holy in heart and life, within fourscore years, but one equal to him I have not known, -- one so inwardly and outwardly devoted to God. So unblamable a character in every respect I have not found either in Europe or America; and I scarce expect to find another such on this side of eternity.

But it is possible we all may be such as he was: Let us then endeavour to follow him as he followed Christ!

Norwich, October 24, 1785

His Epitaph

Here lies the Body

of

THE REV. JOHN WILLIAM DE LA FLECHERE,

Vicar of Madeley;

Who as born at Nyon in Switzerland,

September 12, 1729,

And finished his course, August the 14th, 1785,

In this village,

Where his unexampled labours

Will never be forgotten.

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