

# An Appreciation of John Fletcher

by John Fletcher

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*John Fletcher's life and ministry exemplified unwavering faith, powerful preaching, and a deep commitment to community transformation through Christ's love.*

**Scripture:** 1 Thessalonians 5:16

**Topics:** "The Power of Prayer", "Faithfulness in Ministry"

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## Description

David R. Smith reflects on the life and ministry of John Fletcher, emphasizing his profound impact on the Christian faith during a turbulent time in England. Despite facing persecution and opposition, Fletcher's unwavering devotion to truth and compassion transformed the parish of Madeley, leading to a spiritual revival. His commitment to prayer, personal devotion, and social concern exemplified his pastoral care, while his writings showcased his graciousness and clarity in addressing theological issues. Smith highlights Fletcher's humility and dedication to his congregation over personal ambition, noting that his legacy continues to inspire believers today. Ultimately, Fletcher's life serves as a reminder of the power of faith and the importance of charity in ministry.

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## Transcript

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by David R. Smith

I believe that it was in the providence of God that my early years in the Christian life were spent amongst the Methodists. For, although I now consider that some of their doctrines are not altogether biblical, my soul derived vast benefit from the things I learned in their midst. Upon reflection, I think it likely that I gained more insight from those Methodists who departed this life many decades previously than from those still alive; it is also true that it took me many months to shake off the liberal theology with which modern Methodism impregnated me; nevertheless, my present attitude towards prayer and evangelism owes much to the things which the Methodists taught me.

It was whilst I read John Wesley's Journal in 1949 that I first began to be attracted to Fletcher of Madeley. I was brought face-to-face repeatedly with comments upon the manner of life of this remarkable person, and enheartened by delightful stories concerning his unique ministry. In fact, John Wesley made me feel that the eighteenth century owed more to John Fletcher than many people realised. Here was a man who had been forgotten by modern christendom, and deprived of mention by the historians, but who appears to

have changed the course of national events through his prayers and zeal. It struck me as being strange that such a saint, although reserved (and thus elusive), should be neglected by us if he had been such a source of inspiration and godliness then. The fortunes of history are beyond human explanation, and sometimes the very ones who ought to be long-remembered are pushed out of the limelight by those who have more voluble supporters.

John Fletcher, therefore, began to make a deep impression upon this young lad, although at no small distance, and became the subject of several illustrations in the first sermon that I preached in public, in a little chapel at Seacroft in Yorkshire, on the subject of personal prayer. Stories from his life have cropped up regularly in my sermons from that day to this.

The century into which Fletcher was born, was far from calm; it could be better described as turbulent. This resulted in him being forced to endure much persecution at the hand of heathen forces then reigning in England. However, despite the opposition which he met-and this was considerable-he maintained a Christlike devotion to truth and a calm compassion for others. These noble virtues enabled him both to endure hardship and to win the battle for the Christian faith in the township of Madeley in Shropshire-the only parish in which he served as the appointed minister.

Born in Switzerland in 1729, and educated in that country, Monsieur de la Flechere - for this was his original name-showed a zeal for the things of God from his earliest years. He was one of those young men who have no fear of being thought religious. Upon his arrival in England in 1750, contact was quickly made with those of like mind. Soon, in St. Albans-as though by chance-he met a born-again lady who so encouraged him to seek a lasting experience of Christ that he made it a matter of the utmost importance to join the misunderstood Methodists. There is little doubt that the doctrinal beliefs of the Christians in his homeland fashioned his views of human life and death. Nevertheless, the company of the two Wesley brothers and George Whitefield, provided the basis for the kind of longing which he had always had afterwards, for an increasingly deep knowledge of the Saviour. His view of salvation was almost calvinistic (if judged by today's standards), but he resolved to have fellowship with the arminian group, although he knew that these people had their failings. Perhaps he had met too much dead orthodoxy to permit him to move freely amongst those who were loud in their claim to eternal life but showed little of it in their homes; there is no doubt that he took every opportunity to denounce unethical behaviour in Christians.

Straight after his ordination in March 1757, this likeable young man-not yet thirty years of age-offered himself to John Wesley as an itinerant colleague. This came in direct answer to prayer and caused the Wesleys ever to have a large place in their hearts for him; his energy, charm, forthrightness, and clarity of thought, were a source of encouragement for three busy years.

Then, deciding that the time had come for him to minister from the base of a settled pastorate, he selected little Madeley as his future home. This was not the only church which was open to him (although it had become obvious that the Bishop of London did not want him in that diocese!), but it was the one which looked as if it would make the most demands of a vicar, and yet offer the least financial reward. For twenty-five years, from 1760, Fletcher laboured here; hated, loved, cursed, adored, persecuted, and misunderstood, he shared the plight of the common people with remarkable patience. Although there were large, well-attended churches in those days, which offered fine stipends, he sought a community which needed him. The love of material things, which looms so large in the twentieth century, was not unknown to this well-broughtup cleric, but the call to deny one's self daily was more real to him. Such single-mindedness in derelict congregations (for this is an apt description of the situation at Madeley when

he arrived on the scene) can only bring about either utter failure or complete victory; it pleased God to revive His work in that pathetic corner of His vineyard.

During the first year there, this new bachelor vicar knew abject loneliness, and saw very few folk attend the services. However, believing that the Lord would have him to be faithful, even if only one parishioner turned up, he pressed on. These were days of depression; for weeks on end he would wrestle with the question 'Am I in God's will?' Knowing how illogical it was for him to pay heed to the doubts which crowded in upon him, he could only persevere in the face of heavy odds. Finally, after months of serious prayer and the smallest sign of blessing, he came to see that this was the place where God would have him be, despite the lack of response.

Madeley was full of profane and ignorant people; this was an all-too-obvious fact when Fletcher visited the place prior to his accepting the parish. Any minister, with lower principles than this zealot, would be careful how he mentioned such matters from the pulpit. John Fletcher did not cease to preach against the very things that were daily joys for the parishioners : drunkenness, orgies, bull-baiting, and general immorality! We cannot be surprised, therefore, when we read that he suffered many attacks of all kinds. That his approach was not wrong, however, can be gained from the fact that-within two years-Madeley had changed perceptively. What had been a small country town in which no inhabitant desired decency, and where all forms of religion were derided, became a holy place; the church was packed for worship every Sunday, both morning and evening. We can only presume that his preaching did not amount to mere denunciations, and that much prayer attended the ministry of the Word. Like Richard Baxter of Kidderminster, and others, John Fletcher found the secret of success in pastoral work.

His prescription for this success appears to have been a mixture of prevailing prayer, personal devotion to the Person of Christ, intensive study of the Scriptures, social concern for the flock, and a willing readiness to visit anyone who was in any form of trouble. He had a special corner in his study which he favoured as a place to pray; there he knelt for hours every day-the wall opposite bearing the mark of his agonised petitions. For two evenings a week he sat up reading, in order to obtain a better understanding of the Christian faith, until-just before dawn and overcome with sleep-he retired for a few hours. He organised, and himself played a large part in, care for the aged, the poor, the dying, widows and orphans. He showed a typical evangelical compassion for the social needs of those around him, and gave sacrificially in order that his vision might become reality. His giving was so extensive that little was left of his stipend for the maintenance of his house and for meals.

I recall one little story which illustrates the power of the divine blessing abounding at Madeley during his ministry: a lady who had been converted, and who wished to be at most of the meetings, suffered from an antagonistic husband. This man was a thorough heathen and did everything that he could in order to keep his wife at home; he went out of his way to make her life a misery. One day, as she put on her coat to go to church, he told her-with obvious sincerity-that he could stand no more of this religion of hers and that unless she stayed at home with him this evening, he would strangle her that night; notwithstanding this threat, the lady set off and joined the congregation. As the time passed, she became fearful, thinking of the reception she would have upon her return home. Mr. Fletcher, who knew nothing of this incident, was finding the service heavy going. He did not preach from notes usually, relying upon his memory and the Holy Spirit to bring his thorough preparation to mind, as he spoke. This particular evening, he could not remember his points or even the general outline of the message. Feeling downcast about this unusual situation, and unwilling to speak without inward assurance, he determined to make do with Bible readings only. However, suddenly, he found that his mind was filling with thoughts upon quite a different subject.

Deciding that the Lord was working things together for the good of someone, he shared his anxiety with the gathered flock, then plunged into this new sermon. He did not realise what he was doing until the next day, but for half-an-hour he encouraged this worried woman from the story of the fiery furnace in Daniel ! Now unafraid, the wife hurried back to the waiting husband, assured that no harm would come to her. What met her eyes, however, was beyond her wildest dreams; her heathen man was down on the floor, face to the boards, in an agony of religious conviction, crying out to God for mercy !

Eight years after his induction at Madeley, the Countess of Huntingdon asked Mr. Fletcher to become the president of her newly founded college for student ministers. This was no small honour since there were other clergymen who were better known to this titled lady, and who more fully shared her theological point of view. However, all forms of earthly honour seem to have been of little value to this exceptional man; he did not consider anything from merely a human standpoint. He refused to accept this office, unless it could be a part-time appointment; he wished to remain the vicar of Madeley and continue in the pastoral office. Knowing how easy it is for any minister to run away from the problems of church life by escaping into the quieter confines of a teaching career, I admire this particular stand of Fletcher. It would have been understandable if he had accepted this post and put his church in the care of another. Eight years of hard work are a good reason for some years of lighter duties. This kind of logic made no sense to this high-minded man of God; promotion and easy living had no attraction at all; he knew that he must be down amongst the people. In fact, later on, when the king pressed him to accept a high clerical office in London, he replied-somewhat succinctly - that he wished for nothing but more grace!

The countess, faced with a choice between either Fletcher's terms of acceptance or not having him as the college president, surrendered to his precise offer. She could not have known what a season of blessing there was to follow this appointment. The students confessed that they did not know, at times, if they were in this world or the next. For days at a time, they spent long hours doing nothing other than seeking the face of the Saviour. On occasions, they would not refer to their study books at all for a whole week. The visits of the college president were times of pentecostal visitation; voluntary confession, heartsearching, and delightful prayer meetings, were the natural order of the day. This behaviour might seem strange to those who know that John Fletcher was such an opponent of extremism and so voluble a contender for the need of each minister to be both a student and a man acquainted with contemporary events. Considering that the college was well furnished with competent teachers, Fletcher took the line that he was a sort of visiting pastor who ought to stir up the ordinands in their faith. Knowing the practical problems which they would meet in parish life, he considered that they had need of the most intimate knowledge of the Son of God. He urged them all to seek God in order that they might become partakers of the divine promises, and living emblems of the power of the Almighty.

During this period in his life, he would sometimes be away from his own pulpit on Sundays. Arrangements were made for some of Wesley's itinerant preachers to take his place. Although they were not so eloquent, or as well bred as himself, and despite the fact that his people now wished for none but their own minister to lead the worship, he told his congregation that they would do well to hear more acceptable preachers than himself, when occasion permitted ! Unlike so many who refuse to vacate their pulpits, for fear that a better man might occupy the same during their absence, Fletcher considered every other preacher-however unlearned-to be better than himself.

The spiritual refreshment which shook Trevecca College continuously during this presidency would doubtless have remained if there had not been a bitter controversy within the ranks of the Methodist societies. Although this theological division had been boiling up for several years, it was not until 1770 that

open ferment was seen. It is easy for us now to see that lack of wisdom, ungracious spirits, ready tempers, and unfortunate grammar, were the real culprits behind the whole affair. In the heat of the differences, such calm diagnosis was almost impossible. John Fletcher did his best to repair the breach and heal the wounds; his labours, though praised by all concerned, were of no avail; minds had been made up and there was an unattractive, unrelenting spirit abroad. Fletcher found himself on the other side of the controversy from the Countess of Huntingdon and felt obliged to resign. This was a sad moment for him, and a shock from which the college hardly recovered; however, it was a matter of principle, and the resignation could not be avoided. His flock at Madeley received the news with as much joy as the students at Trevecca greeted it with tears.

John Fletcher was unwilling to pronounce upon a matter until he was sure of the facts. When he had fully assured himself as to the truth concerning something, he could be relied upon to blazon it abroad. Such zeal, added to his natural abilities, caused him to become a prolific writer. As a result of this, we are still able to see how graciously a man can speak of his opponents and of heretics. All of his pamphlets, booklets, sermons, and theses, are written with invincible charity and the noblest courtesy; his outspoken attacks upon the main heresies of his day (including unitarianism) were masterpieces of clarity, truth and uncommon affection for the souls of those enmeshed in lies. Instead of making his theological enemies feel small (which is the trait of this century), he made them feel wanted by his Saviour. This approach made more than a few stalwarts of untruth seek to understand the Scriptures better. I consider it most unfortunate that his work is not better read than it is. Modern controversies might die quicker if the Christian personalities involved had Fletcher's example to lean on.

His unchanging attitude towards money and every form of worldly wealth, must have appeared incomprehensible to his contemporaries; he was quite unmoved by offers of comfort and luxuries. In fact, purely on the grounds of the fact that a 'certain young lady' had wealth, he spurned the love of the one woman he felt he could marry. Only after Miss Bosanquet had been disowned by her family for her evangelical views, which was twenty-five years after they first met, did Fletcher break his silence and make the long-awaited proposal. Even then, he made it quite clear that, although he loved her, it was her penury which made it possible for him to approach her in this way!

They were married in 1781, when the groom was fiftytwo years old. It was a blissful enterprise and accepted gloriously in Madeley, even though the bride was a native of Leytonstone and not a local girl. It seems sad that such a happy partnership was broken forcibly by death only three years and nine months later.

Throughout the whole of the ministerial life of John Fletcher, he knew remarkable spiritual power in preaching; there is little doubt that he was anointed with divine unction and spoke in the demonstration of the Holy Spirit. His regular congregation grew by leaps and bounds, the young and the old being greatly affected at every service; tears were commonplace. It did not matter where he went in the British Isles, nor the language spoken by the people, the result was the same; on the continent, as in his parish, whole audiences were reduced to a state of deep conviction. Sometimes the congregations could not disperse for hours after his preaching was finished, because of the mutual longing for divine grace to follow repentance.

So powerful, and so eloquent a preacher was Fletcher that John Wesley affirmed repeatedly that it was he, and not George Whitefield, who should have such national fame. Wesley did not say this spitefully, for he had the highest regard for his ardent colleague Whitefield; he was looking at the facts in a logical way,

and gave his own opinion. In fact, Wesley went further and placed upon record his constant wish that Fletcher be made the leader of the Methodist movement, after his death. Little did he know then, that he would outlive his colleague by six years, despite the difference in their ages.

Fletcher's ministry, with its powerful effect upon the populace, caused jealousy to rise in his relationships with neighbouring clergy. Their reaction to the divine blessing at Madeley was not to praise God for the change, nor to thank Fletcher for bringing a new spirit into the area; they criticised the unwanted minister. They got together and made an official complaint about him on the grounds of schism. Their argument was that his regular recommendation for good living so upset some of the communicants at Madeley that they could not bear to attend the communion services. Since these folk were, by virtue of their baptism, members of the local church, and since the vicar had caused them to stop making their communion by his preaching, therefore he was dividing the Body of Christ !

Fletcher found that it was pointless trying to argue with people about spiritual matters if they were not born-again; he did not try to convince them that he was right, therefore, by tirades and letters of self-justification, he meekly bore the persecution. What letters he wrote, by way of reply to the offensive missives he received, were the warmest of communications. In due course, his enemies learned to respect his godly attitude towards all things.

Sometimes his preaching would contain prophetic utterances of apostolic quality. On one occasion he turned aside from his message to foretell-with great accuracy the French Revolution; this long-drawn-out terror did not begin to take place until four years after his death. On other occasions, he would-without warning-begin to lay hold of God for the healing of a parishioner. Although he appears to have done this only when led of God to do so, and although he was careful not to pray for the healing of others until he had first made them aware of the whole content of the Gospel, there are many cases of remarkable healing on record. However, despite these results, it could not be said that he was some kind of healing evangelist; he did not offer healing, or salvation, as though he were the purveyor of such blessing.

When it was discovered that he was suffering from tuberculosis, he remained as calm as ever, asserting-with child-like simplicity-that he was in need of divine chastisement. Instead of resting or playing the role of patient, he went on a preaching tour to Switzerland in order to share with his fellow countrymen the things which God had shown him in recent years. He bore suffering in the same way that he endured misunderstanding; despite his sensitive nature, he was able-by God's help-to remain calm in every crisis.

His death in 1785, at the age of fifty-five, was untimely and premature; he had lived like a flame of fire but had burned out more quickly than was expected; the whole country was saddened by the loss. John Wesley promised to write his life story as soon as he could accomplish it, so that this man's experiences might be set down for posterity. A year later, at the age of eighty-three, the task was complete. In that large manuscript Wesley wrote 'I have not known one so uniformly and deeply devoted to God ... nor do I expect to find another such, on this side of eternity.'

If he had lived a little longer he would have been the prime mover in the foundation of an official Methodist Church. Any kind of splits in church fellowship were abhorrent to him, yet he had written at length, as early as 1775, that division between the Anglicans and Methodists would become necessary. This does not mean that he adopted secessionist ideals pointlessly, nor that he refused to see any other viewpoint; it means that he came to see the need for either a complete reformation of the state church, with resultant revised prayer book and doctrines, or else a separate evangelical body. He was ahead of his time in this

respect as in others; such suggestions as these, when he made them in one of his many manuscripts, were quite unacceptable. However, the time came when the break was forced upon the Methodists by circumstances. This resulted in a shambles of divisions and splits which would have broken Fletcher's heart. If such action is ever necessary, it should be based upon the kind of scriptural principles which he advocated; schism based upon precipitate decision or environments must lead to difficulties afterwards. It is unfortunate that his colleagues did not pay more heed to Fletcher whilst they had time to do so. They would have saved themselves much trouble by taking note of his wise counsel.

It is my opinion that believers of today would suffer no loss if they had the same charity, graciousness, and clarity of thought that were the daily companions of the Reverend John Fletcher. I hope that this book will have whetted the appetite of the reader to obtain a copy of the life story of this remarkable man,(1) and to read further literary efforts from this sanctified pen.

(1) Dr. Oswald J. Smith has reduced Fletcher's Life Story to a helpful size and coupled it with the Diary of David Brainerd. This interesting title is published by Marshall, Morgan and Scott London.

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