

# THOMAS FULLER

Paul Winchester

“God’s children are immortal while their Father hath any thing for them to do on earth.” (Thomas Fuller 1608-1661).

Thomas Fuller, ordained in 1630 as curate of St. Benet’s Church, Cambridge, held a variety of posts in ministry in turbulent times, and was a prolific author. One of his longest and perhaps most notable periods of ministry was at Waltham Abbey from 1649-1658. This was followed by his last post as Rector of Cranford, Middlesex.

## **Examples from the works of Thomas Fuller, illustrating the above quote**

*The Church - History of Britain from the Birth of Jesus Christ until the year 1648*, endeavoured by Thomas Fuller London 1655, Book II, Cent. viii.18. This extract is in Volume 1, p.178, of the three-volume edition published in London by William Tegg in 1868.

“One of the last things he (Bede) did, was the translating of the Gospel of St. John into English. When death seized on him, one of his devout scholars, whom he used for his Secretary, or Amanuensis, complained, “My beloved Master, there remains yet one sentence unwritten.” “Write it then quickly,” replied Bede: and summoning all his spirits together (like the last blaze of a candle going out) he indited it, and expired. Thus God’s children are immortal, while their Father hath anything for them to do on earth; and death, that beast, cannot overcome and kill them, till first they have finished their testimony: which done, like silk-worms, they willingly die, when their web is ended, and are comfortably entombed in their own endeavours.”

Also available in

*Wise words and quaint counsels of Thomas Fuller*, selected and arranged, with a short sketch of the author’s life, by Augustus Jessop Oxford: Clarendon Press 1892 page 27

*Thomas Fuller: selections*: with essays by Charles Lamb, Leslie Stephen, &c./ with an introduction and notes by E.K. Broadus Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928 The Clarendon series of English literature, page 120.

*Good Thoughts in Bad Times* by Thomas Fuller, 1645, Scripture Observations, 10.

This extract is in “Fuller’s thoughts”, edited by A.R. Waller, London, Grant Richards 1902. The Religious Life series, page 27. (This volume is an edition of an earlier collection of three of Fuller’s works: Good Thoughts in Bad Times, Good Thoughts in Worse Times, Mixt Contemplations in Better Times).

“Lord, I read of the two witnesses. ‘And when they shall have finished their testimony, the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and shall overcome them, and kill them.’ (Revelation 11 v.7) They could not be killed whilst they were doing, but when they had done their work; during their employment they were invincible. No better armour against the darts of death than to be busied in thy service. Why art thou so heavy, O my soul ? No malice of man can antedate my end a minute, whilst my Maker hath any work for me to do. And when all my daily task is ended, why should I grudge then to go to bed?”

Also available in *Wise words and quaint counsels of Thomas Fuller*, selected and arranged, with a short sketch of the author’s life, by Augustus Jessop, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1892, page 243.

*Life out of death*. A sermon by Thomas Fuller, first preached in 1652, first printed in 1655. The extract below is in *The Collected Sermons of Thomas Fuller, 1631-1659* edited by J.E. Bailey, completed by W.E.A. Axon London 1891. Volume II page 384.

“Secondly, thou wouldest live longer to do God more service in thy Calling; but if thou perceivest the day of thy dissolution to approach, know that thou hast done all that God hath designed to be performed by thee. The witnesses “when they had finished their Testimony, (Revelation 11, v.7)

then the Beast out of the bottomless pit made war against them, overcame them and killed them.” Whilst any part, portion, parcel or particle of their testimony was unfinished, were it to the least “iota” thereof, they were unconquerable by death, and secure from the darts thereof. Know in like manner whilst thou hast anything to do, thou shalt not die, and if death seizeth on thee, it is an evident sign that thou hast finished what God intended to be acted by thee in this world.

Venerable Bede had almost finished the translation of the Gospel of St. John into English, when he swooned away, which his Secretary seeing, who wrote for him (as Baruch for Jeremiah) cried out, “O master, there wanteth yet two or three verses to be translated,” hereat the old man revived, recruited his spirits, and mustered in all the force of his mind together, held out to the finishing of the same, and so expired. Assure thyself, thou shalt in like manner be immortal so long as there remaineth any part of thy Testimony unperformed by thee.”

*Abel Redivivus or The dead yet speaking:* The lives and deaths of the modern divines, written by several contributors and edited into one volume by Thomas Fuller, London: Printed by Thomas Brudenell for John Stafford dwelling in Bride’s Churchyard, near Fleet street, 1651, pp.146-152. The Life and Death of Paulus Fagius (one of the German reformers, 1504-1550).

“Before his departure (from Isna [Isny]), the town was greatly afflicted with the pestilence; and he understanding that many of the wealthiest of the inhabitants intended to forsake the place, without having any respect or care of such as laboured with that disease, and that the houses of such as were infected, were commanded to be shut up by the magistrate, he openly admonished them, either to continue in the town, or liberally to bestow their alms before their departure, for the relief of such as were sick. And during the time of the visitation, he himself in person would visit those that were sick; he would administer spiritual comfort unto them, pray for them, and would be present with them day and night, and yet by the providence of God he remained untouched, and was preserved by the all-powerful hand of God.”

Also available in C.H. Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, Volume 2, page 101, commenting on Psalm 91, verse 7 “A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee.”

*The Life and Death of John Reynolds (1549-1607)*, pp. 477-498

“Born in Pinhoe, Devon, he was educated at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, where he was elected a Fellow in 1568. At Oxford he “wholly addicted” himself to Bible study, and came to saving faith in Christ. A distinguished career culminated in his appointment as President of his former college in 1598, and a reputation as “the most learned man in England.”

Staying “in London to oversee the Press and correct the proofs, as he walked in Finsbury Fields, in the year of our Lord 1602, an arrow whether shot purposely by some Jesuited Papist or at random I know not, fell upon his breast, but entered not his body, not so much by reason of the weak service of his gown held up before him in folds, as the strong ‘buckler of faith’, which whosoever hath on him, need not ‘fear any terror by night, nor the arrow that flieth by day.’ Psalm 91:5.” (Abel Redivivus pp.485-486). Thus God preserved him for the greatest work of his life.

He was the chief representative of the Puritan cause at the Hampton Court Conference (1604), where, as always, his high character and wide learning won him respect even from his theological adversaries. It was as a result of his suggestion that the Conference decided that a new translation of the Bible should be prepared. John Reynolds may therefore be justly regarded as “The father of the Authorised Version.” He was given a prominent part in that mighty task, sitting in the company which translated the Prophets; they met once a week in his lodgings in Corpus Christi College. He was by then seriously ill with consumption, but, like Bede almost nine hundred years earlier, he persevered with the work God had given him to do, and inspired the scholars gathered around him to complete it. He died on 21<sup>st</sup> May, 1607, before the Authorised Version was published, but not before he had finished his vital contribution to it. God had preserved him through violence and illness until the great work he had been called to initiate was safely on its way to completion.”

This information about Reynolds is also available in Gustavus S. Paine, *The Men behind the King James Version* 1959, republished in 1977 in paperback by Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, pp. 22-26. Paine quotes most of the words of Fuller which I have quoted above.

### **Some other examples illustrating the same truth**

#### William Tyndale (1494?-1536)

In exile on the Continent Tyndale translated the New Testament and a large part of the Old Testament into English. His work, especially his final version of the New Testament, contains much which ultimately passed unchanged into the Authorised Version. In 1535 he was imprisoned at Vilvorde near Brussels, and burnt at the stake in 1536. His last words were, "Lord, open the eyes of the King of England." It was not long before this prayer was answered; the first English Bible to bear the King's authorisation was printed in 1537, and on 5<sup>th</sup> September, 1538 King Henry VIII issued a royal proclamation that an English Bible be placed in every church in the land.

#### Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556)

Archbishop of Canterbury, burnt at the stake in Oxford on 21<sup>st</sup> March, 1556, during the reign of Queen Mary, Cranmer's lasting achievement was the Book of Common Prayer. His second version of this great work in 1552 was finally revised with only minor changes in 1662, and as such remains an official worship book of the Church of England; it is still in use, though not to the extent that it was before 1965 when alternative forms were first authorised. As he faced death Cranmer may quite naturally have felt that perhaps his life's work was wasted, unless the Lord granted him a vision of the future in which, as soon as Queen Mary's brief reign was over, his liturgy would provide a vehicle for his nation's worship for centuries to come.

#### John Newton and William Wilberforce

John Newton (1725-1807), a slave trader, was wonderfully converted, and exercised a very fruitful ministry in the Church of England, as well as writing some great hymns which have stood the test of time. With his past experience he was able to help William Wilberforce in his campaign to end the dreadful traffic in which he had once been involved. In 1807, the year of his death, the trade was stopped by law. However, existing slaves were not yet freed, and Wilberforce continued his campaign until, shortly before his own death in 1833, Parliament abolished slavery throughout the British Empire.

#### Dr. John Ryland's Hymn

John Ryland DD (1753-1825) was a Baptist minister, pastoring churches at Nottingham and Bristol, where he was also president of the Baptist College from 1794 until his death. He wrote nearly a hundred hymns, and these were collected together and published in 1863 by D. Sedgwick. The following one expresses beautifully the theme of this paper.

Sovereign Ruler of the skies,  
Ever gracious, ever wise;  
All my times are in Thy hand.  
All events at Thy command.

His decree who formed the earth  
Fixed my first and second birth;  
Parents, native place, and time,  
All appointed were by Him.

He that formed me in the womb,  
He shall guide me to the tomb:  
All my times shall ever be  
Ordered by His wise decree.

Times of sickness, times of health,  
Times of penury and wealth,  
Times of trial and of grief,  
Times of triumph and relief,

Times the tempter's power to prove,  
Times to taste the Saviour's love,  
All must come, and last, and end,  
As shall please my heavenly Friend.

Plagues and death around me fly;  
Till He bids, I cannot die,  
Not a single shaft can hit,  
Till the God of love sees fit.

*I place on record my sincere gratitude to the Rev. J.P. Thackway of Holywell for giving me the inspiration for this study through an article on the history of the Authorised Version in the Bible League Quarterly July-September, 1997; and for kindly providing me with information in the process, including a copy of Ryland's hymn.*