

# William Tyndale: Father of the English Bible



## Introduction

We all have many Bibles in our homes: our own Bibles and our children's Bibles, as well as family Bibles used for family devotions. Most of us have the King James Version of the Bible, sometimes called the Authorized Version, prepared under the aegis of James I in 1611. It is a sad fact that our Bibles often lie unused, taken for granted, a somewhat peripheral part of our life. Yet behind our Bibles stands a story of great heroism, towering faith in God, and drops of martyr's blood. The story is that of William Tyndale, father of the English Bible.

## Tyndale's Early Life

William Tyndale was born sometime in the early 1490s on the Welsh border into the home of a well-to-do farmer. He went to Magdalen Hall, Oxford where he received his M.A. degree in 1515 and was ordained into the Roman Catholic clergy. In that same year he transferred to Cambridge University probably because he had heard that the Greek New Testament of Erasmus was available there, and he was interested in reading Scripture in its original language.

One must understand the situation in England at this time. Henry VIII, husband of many wives, was on the throne. Dedicated Roman Catholic, but bitter enemy of the pope's rule in England, Henry persecuted Protestants on the one hand, but

separated the church of England from papal control on the other hand. The church itself was rife with evil, wickedness in high places, and fornication of every sort. One of the chroniclers of the age characterized the priests as running from the houses of prostitutes to the altar to perform mass; incapable of understanding the Latin in which they mumbled their liturgies; superstitious and worshippers of such relics as a gown of the virgin Mary, a piece of the burning bush of Moses, straw from the manger at Bethlehem, and a complete skeleton of one of the babies murdered by Herod the Great; drunkards and gluttons whose wicked lives were supported by the blood, sweat and tears of the common working folk.

The Universities, however, were seething with the new learning of the Renaissance, the discoveries of Columbus and Cabot, and the teachings of Luther, the Reformer of Germany.

It was in Cambridge that Tyndale was converted from his Romanism to Lutheranism. And it was in these ancient halls that Tyndale first became acquainted with Scripture in its original Greek, and not in the fusty Latin of the Vulgate.

#### Preparation For His Work

It was in 1521 that Tyndale joined the household of Sir John Walsh at Little Sudbury Manor, a few miles north of Bath. Here he functioned as chaplain, tutor and Secretary, but also preached occasionally at Bristol where he expounded the Lutheran doctrines of justification by faith alone and the free gift of forgiveness of sins through repentance. He was also a frequent guest at the table of Sir John Walsh where notable clerics from all over England often assembled. Their sophistries and hypocrisies were exposed by Tyndale's bold appeals to Scriptural teachings so that, along with his sermons, Tyndale's views aroused the hatred and fury of friars, abbots and prelates.

It was at one of these meals that Tyndale spoke to a visiting cleric those words for which he remains beloved by all succeeding generations of those who cherish Scripture: "If God spare my life, ere many years pass, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou dost."<sup>(1)</sup>

Warned by his superiors to desist in his teachings, and resolved to begin the great work of making the Bible available to the people of his beloved country, he set out for London to secure permission from the authorities in the church to translate the Scriptures. This permission he sought from Cuthbert Tunstall, bishop of London, a scholarly man and close friend of Erasmus. But Tunstall, loyal to Rome and afraid of the new Lutheranism, refused permission to Tyndale and became, in later years, one of Tyndale's most vicious opponents.

During his stay in London, Tyndale lived with Lord Monmouth to whose house God graciously and providentially brought the Reformer. Lord Monmouth was an influential Lutheran; but more importantly, a friend of the merchants who operated the docks in London over which poured a steady stream of Lutheran literature. Tyndale was convinced that his endeavors would never be successful in England: "Not only was there no room in my lord of London's palace to translate the New Testament," Tyndale wrote, "but also that there was no place to do it in all England." The London merchants agreed to support the endeavor and Tyndale left the country for Germany never to return. The year was 1524.

### The Word Of Translating

It might be well to pause for a moment and consider what Tyndale was doing. The Romish Church in England had forbidden the Bible to be translated into the common tongue. The church was adamant about this and did everything in its power to enforce this rule. There is no question about it but that the reason was simply that the Bible in the hands of the common people would reveal how totally corrupt the Romish church had become. The church did not want people to know this. One cleric with whom Tyndale spoke about translating the Scriptures raged: "We had better be without God's laws than the pope's."<sup>(2)</sup>

Tyndale saw the absolute need for reform in England. But he saw too that no reform could possibly come about without the Bible being the standard of truth and life. And, undoubtedly persuaded by Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, he understood that the Bible had to be in the hands of every believer in a language which they understood.

All of this is obvious. What is so totally amazing is that Tyndale's convictions were so strong that he determined to devote his life to accomplish that goal. And he determined to devote his life to that goal in spite of the fact that it would

mean exile, poverty, suffering, and finally a martyr's death. It was clear to Tyndale from the outset that he would eventually be killed for what he determined to do; he went ahead with the work anyway.

His time in Europe was not pleasant. He probably stayed briefly in Wittenberg where he almost certainly met Luther. But the main work of publishing was done in Cologne. The New Testament was ready for printing in 1525 -- only a year after Tyndale fled England. While the printing was in progress, an assistant spoke too freely over his wine about the work, and the news came to Johannes Dobneck, alias Cochlaeus, a bitter enemy of the Reformation. A raid was arranged, but Tyndale was forewarned and succeeded in fleeing with the printed pages and manuscripts.

He settled in Wörms and in 1526 the first complete edition of the English New Testament was published. It was smuggled into England through the London merchants in bales of cloth, boxes of food, and other goods of trade. Many of the copies were confiscated and burned by the Roman authorities and many were bought up by the church and burned in St. Paul's by Cuthbert Tunstall. In God's irony, the money gained by the sale of these volumes was sent to Tyndale to be used for an edited and improved edition.

Tunstall hated the Bible and about exhausted himself in curses as he described it:

[It is] intermingled with certain articles of heretical depravity and pernicious erroneous opinions, pestilent, scandalous, and seductive of simple minds . . . of which translation many books, containing the pestilent and pernicious poison in the vulgar tongue, have been dispersed in great numbers throughout our diocese; which truly, unless it be speedily foreseen will without doubt infect and contaminate the flock committed to us, with the pestilent poison and the deadly disease of heretical depravity."

This was the opinion which the church had of God's Word!<sup>(3)</sup>

New and improved editions of the New Testament were constantly being prepared by Tyndale, many containing marginal notes, some of which were directed against the papacy. But Tyndale also began work on the Old Testament. For this he had to learn Hebrew, which he did in the course of his

wanderings in Europe. In 1530 the Pentateuch was completed and printed in Antwerp, Belgium, although Tyndale had to do the work twice because, in travelling by boat, Tyndale suffered shipwreck, and the first manuscripts were lost. Because the volumes continued to be smuggled into England and because the authorities in England could not stop the steady flow and wide distribution, their fury increased and their determination to kill Tyndale became an obsession. It was decided to send men to Europe to catch Tyndale and arrest him. These efforts were, for the most part, unsuccessful. It is hard to know why. The spies were many and clever and Tyndale made no great efforts to keep his whereabouts secret. It is true that Tyndale had many friends, also in Antwerp; but it seems that we finally must come to the conclusion that God watched over His servant in a special way because God was bringing reformation through His holy Word to England.

### Tyndale's Martyrdom

But when God's work for Tyndale was completed, God took Tyndale out of this life; and God gave his faithful servant the privilege of leaving this life through a martyr's death. A worthless no-good by the name of Henry Philips thought to ingratiate himself with the authorities of the church and perhaps win fame and fortune by trapping Tyndale. He was successful. He posed as a friend, established a close relationship of trust with Tyndale, wormed his way into the home of Poyntz (with whom Tyndale was staying in Antwerp -- although Poyntz never really trusted Philips) and, when Poyntz was out of town, persuaded Tyndale to go with him for a walk. Leading Tyndale down a dark alley, he pushed the reformer into the grasp of some scoundrels no less evil than Philips, who hidden by a carefully prepared plan, seized him and turned him over to the authorities.

Tyndale was imprisoned in the castle of Vilvorde near Brussels. Here he lived for one year and 135 days without heat or light from candles or lamps, without sufficient clothing to keep him warm or food to sustain his weak frame, without friends and books. His only visitors were tormentors who bombarded him incessantly with demands that he recant. While Poyntz and friends in England did everything in their power to secure his release, the Romish authorities, thirsty for his blood, were not about to let their quarry go now that they had him in their grasp.

He was tried, defrocked and sentenced to death. In the early dawn death was administered. He was bound to a stake, an iron chain was fastened around his neck, a hemp noose was placed at his throat and brush was heaped about him. The executioner, with all his might, snapped down on the noose and within seconds Tyndale was strangled. His limp body was then burned as the pile of brush was lit. His last words were: "Lord, open the king of England's eyes." With that he fell asleep.

### Our Heritage

The lasting monument to his martyrdom is our King James Version of the Bible. John Wycliffe had, two centuries earlier, translated the Bible into English. But it had never been printed and Wycliffe's translation was from the Latin Vulgate. Tyndale's was from the Hebrew and Greek. One incomplete copy of Tyndale's Cologne edition survives and two copies of the 6000 that were printed in Wörms are extant. The 1934 edition, printed in Antwerp, is the last and the best. It formed the basis for the famous Coverdale Bible. Though Thomas More, an English Roman Catholic and humanist, called Tyndale's Bible, "The Testament of Antichrist," it survived first in Coverdale's Bible. In 1537 (one year after Tyndale's death) it was ordered by the king of England to be placed in every parish church in the realm and made available to every man, woman and child within the kingdom.

90% of Tyndale's Bible passed into the KJV and 75% into the RSV. It is basically Tyndale's Bible which we use today.

A brief quotation from his Bible will show the similarity, although the quotation is in the English of Tyndale's day. The passage is Romans 12:1, 2:

"I beseeche you therefore brethren by the mercifulness of God, that ye make youre bodyes a quicke sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God which is youre reasonable servynge off God. And fassion note youre selves lyke unto this worlde. But be ye chaunged (in your shape) by the renuyng of youre wittes that ye may fele what thyng that good, that acceptable and perfaicte will of God is."

Not only ought the story of Tyndale give us renewed appreciation for our Bibles; it ought also to fill our hearts with thanksgiving to God that He has given the church such men of courage and conviction that we can have God's Word today

to read, to study, to enjoy, to believe. When we read the beloved words of our King James Version, we ought never to forget that these words were written with the ink of martyr's blood.

## REFERENCES

1. These words were an echo of the famous wish of Erasmus who in the preface of his \_\_\_\_\_ wrote: "I would to God that the ploughman would sing a text of the Scripture at his plough and that the weaver would hum them to the tune of his shuttle."

2. Quoted from \_\_\_\_\_, published by Presbyterian Board of Publications in Philadelphia. The book is a collection of tracts put out by the London Tract Society. Our readers will be interested to know that one of the nicest biographies of William Tyndale, usable by young people and adults, is \_\_\_\_\_, by Brian H. Edwards; Evangelical Press, 1988.

3. Quoted from \_\_\_\_\_, p. 92.