

Words to Know:

Lollards: A group of reformers who were followers of John Wycliffe

Transubstantiation: The false teaching that the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper change into the actual body and blood of Christ.

Memorize the quote from William Tyndale:

"I defy the Pope, and all his laws, and if God spare my life ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost."

In our previous lesson we learned about Martin Luther, the great German Reformer who translated the Bible into German from the Textus Receptus in 1534.

Today we jump back about 200 years earlier to learn about John Wycliffe. Known as the "Morning star of the Reformation," Wycliffe planted the seeds of reformation and translated the Bible into English for the first time in history.

Part 1: John Wycliffe

John Wycliffe (1320-1384) was a theologian and early reformer in the Roman Catholic Church during the 14th century. He initiated the first translation of the Bible into the English language and is considered the main pioneer of the Protestant Reformation. Wycliffe was born Yorkshire, England, between 1320 and 1330; and he died at Lutterworth (near Leicester) December 31, 1384.

(www.greatsite.com)

Wycliffe studied and taught at Oxford most of his life. Until 1378, he believed the best way to reform the Roman Catholic Church was by the government seizing property from corrupt churches. This did not turn out to be an effective method of reform.

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In 1379 Wycliffe began a different strategy for reform. In writing, he declared that Christ is the head of the church, not the Pope. He asserted that the **Bible**, not the **church**, is the sole authority for every believer. He taught that the church should model itself after the pattern of the **New Testament**.

To support his teachings, Wycliffe translated the Bible into English. He did not have Greek manuscripts available so he translated from the Latin.

Wycliffe's Bible was the first Bible ever to be translated into the English language. The printing press was not yet invented in Wycliffe's lifetime. Therefore, his Bibles were hand written. It took several months to create each hand written copy.

His first English New Testament was completed in 1382.

Wycliffe further spoke against the Roman Catholic Church by opposing their teaching of ***transubstantiation***. This was the false teaching that the bread and wine of the Lord's supper became the **actual** body and blood of Christ.

The church used this to exercise power over the people. If someone did not agree with the church, the priest could withhold salvation by withholding the body and blood of Christ in the Communion.

Wycliffe's views were condemned by the church in 1382, and he returned to Lutterworth. He had formed a group of preachers who were faithful to his teachings. These preachers were known as the **Lollards**.

(Christianity Through the Centuries, Earle Cairns, Zondervan Publishing House, 1981)

The Roman Catholic church did not take kindly to the teachings of Wycliffe or his spread of the Bible in the English language. Many of the **Lollards** were captured, tied to a post and burned alive.

By God's providence, Wycliffe lived to an old age and died naturally. He lay in his grave for forty-one years before being removed from his grave by the church leaders. They burned his bones and scattered his ashes into the river. His enemies thought they closed the door on Wycliffe's influence.

"These and all others must know that, as there is no counsel against the Lord, so there is no keeping down of [truth], but it will spring up and come out of dust and ashes, as appeared right well in this man; for though they dug up his body, burned his bones, and drowned his ashes, yet the Word of

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God and truth of his doctrine, with the fruit and success thereof, they could not burn." -*Foxes Book of Maryrs*

Part 2: William Tyndale

We now move forward a couple hundred years to a man named William Tyndale. Between the lifetime of John Wycliffe and the lifetime of William Tyndale, many changes took place in the world that would help advance the spread of God's Word.

Wycliffe's life was before the invention **printing press**, so his Bibles were hand written. Erasmus had not yet lived and compiled Greek manuscripts into the Textus Receptus. Wycliffe had no access to Greek manuscripts. His Bible was translated from the Latin Bible.

"Johann Gutenberg invented the printing press in the 1450's, and the first book to ever be printed was a Latin language Bible, printed in Mainz, Germany.

Gutenberg's Bibles were surprisingly beautiful, as each leaf Gutenberg printed was later colorfully hand-illuminated. Ironically, though he had created what many believe to be the most important invention in history, Gutenberg was a victim of [dishonest] business associates who took control of his business and left him in poverty.

Nevertheless, the invention of the movable-type printing press meant that Bibles and books could finally be effectively produced in large quantities in a short period of time. This was essential to the success of the Reformation."- (www.greatsite.com)

William Tyndale lived during the same time period as Martin Luther.

Tyndale was born into a wealthy family 1494 in Gloucestershire, England. In 1512 he received his Bachelor of Arts degree at Oxford University.

At this time in history, translating, or owning a Bible in the English language was considered a heresy by the church and a crime by the government. The Catholic church controlled the Bible and insisted it was only to be read in **Latin**. They believed that God spoke Latin. Church leaders knew Latin, and only church leaders could communicate directly with God.

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It was a time of Bible ignorance. All across Europe, these were dark days of spiritual famine. In one city it was found that nine pastors did not know how many commandments are in the Bible. 33 did not know where to find them in the Bible. 168 could not quote them. 39 did not know where the Lord's prayer appeared in the Bible. 34 did not know who was the author of the Lord's prayer.

At Oxford University, Tyndale was bothered by how little the Bible was taught.

"He never ceased to maintain that the essential study had to be the Scriptures. Only in the Scriptures could the truths of life through God and Christ be discovered and acted on. Oxford, he thought, wasted valuable time on Roman literature which was useful for fluency in Latin but irrelevant to the main purpose." *William Tyndale, A Very Brief History*, Melvyn Bragg, p.9

By the time Tyndale received his degree at Oxford and moved to Cambridge sometime between 1517 and 1521, he was already working on translating the Bible into English.

There were two powerful forces that affected England and Germany at this time. One was the recent publication of Erasmus Textus Receptus Greek New Testament. The other was Martin Luther's 95 Thesis of 1517.

Tyndale saw the great value of the Textus Receptus. He recognized it as God's preserved Word. This was the source he used for translating to English. Tyndale was also inspired by the work of **Martin Luther**.

Erasmus' belief that every person should be able to read the Bible on their own became the passion that drove Tyndale's mission.

The Catholic church felt threatened by the Bible being in the hands of common people. What if the common people realized that they didn't need to pay for indulgences? What if they saw that there was no need to confess sin to a priest? How would the church make its money if the common people stopped paying to get their friends and family out of purgatory?

"Where was Tyndale in all this? He was now utterly devoted to learning Greek to such a pitch of accomplishment that he could translate the Greek New Testament—the words of Christ and the apostles—into English. This he believed would unlock truth for the English."-- *William Tyndale, A Very Brief History*, Melvyn Bragg, p.15

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In 1521 Tyndale went back home to Gloucestershire. There he took residence with the family of Sir John Walsh. He became the private teacher for the Walsh children. Here with determination, he worked 12 to 15 hours a day on translation. Over time he mastered 8 languages.

The Walsh family were wealthy and hosted frequent guests. Often, they would sit at the table with guests and discuss politics, popes, purgatory, and whatever religious matters arose.

Whenever there was a dispute, Tyndale would prove a person wrong by pointing them to Scripture. Over time, high society guests began to complain to the Walsh family about Tyndale.

Some debates became heated. On one occasion Tyndale was debating an educated church leader who declared, "We were better without God's Law than the Pope's."

Tyndale's famous response was, "I defy the Pope, and all his laws, and if God spare my life ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost!"

Tyndale's strong stand soon made him an enemy of the established church. Not wanting to endanger the Walsh family, Tyndale relocated to London in 1523. He moved to London in hopes of finding work and a place to work on translating the Bible into English. He found no help or encouragement in his work in London. He realized there was no place left in England to do his work.

In 1524, Tyndale set sail down the Thames River and moved to **Germany**. There were many printing presses in Germany. In the city of Cologne, he worked at the printing house of Peter Quentell. There they began publishing copies of Tyndale's work.

Another Englishman, named John Dobneck, who was also a customer of Peter Quentell found out what Tyndale was doing. Under the influence of alcohol, some of Quentell's hired men told Dobneck that 3000 New Testaments were being printed to send to England. Dobneck reported Tyndale to the government who raided the print shop.

Tyndale heard about the planned raid in time to gather everything he could and flee to the city of Worms. There he continued his work. Thousands of copies of the New Testament were published in English and hidden in sacks of grain on ships headed for England.

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Within a short time, Tyndale's English New Testaments began to spread throughout England. England's King Henry VIII, set up a spy system to seek out and destroy all the Bibles and printers they could find.

London became a place of persecution, torture, unfair court trials and burning people who owned English Bibles. Bibles were gathered and burned publicly.

The more Bibles they burned, the more they seemed to multiply across the country.

The Roman Emperor, the Roman Catholic Vatican, and King Henry VIII, all joined in the search to find and destroy William Tyndale.

William Tyndale's English New Testament helped unify and standardize the English language. His ability to translate beautifully and clearly made his Bible to become a foundation that upon which the **King James** Bible would later be built.

"From boyhood Tyndale had aimed to help make a Bible in his native tongue for all who would listen or read. From his youth he had bent himself to the task. He had mastered many languages. He had been driven out of his country. He had worked, sometimes for 18 hours a day. He had been harassed and threatened and...been subject to many...hardships."—*William Tyndale, A Very Brief History*, Melvyn Bragg, pg. 57

Tyndale's second edition of the Bible was published in 1534.

In 1535, Tyndale was living with a friend, Thomas Poyntz, in Antwerp, Germany. He was visited by a man from England by the name of Phillips. This man posed as a friend and showed interest in Tyndale's work. He and Tyndale went into the village for a meal. At the end of an alley, Phillips had guards posted who captured Tyndale.

Tyndale was returned to England, where he spent the next year in prison. While in prison he continued to study and write. He wrote a book titled, *Faith Alone Justifies Before God*.

God had helped him accomplish what his heart desired—to put the Bible into the hands of the common people. He completed the entire New Testament, the Pentateuch, and the Book of Jonah.

October 6, 1536, William Tyndale was led down the crowded street in a small town of Vilvoorde. He was led to the center of town where a wooden

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pillar was prepared. They tied him to the pillar, and laid straw and sticks around him. They tied a rope around his neck. His last words were, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes!"

His executioner pulled the rope tight around his neck and lit the fire around him.

William Tyndale gave his life so that every common English-speaking person could read the Bible for himself. He wanted the plough boy, the farmer, the factory worker, the children...to be able to read the very Word of God.

In a short time, God answered Tyndale's dying prayer. The King of England had a serious disagreement with the Pope. King Henry VIII wanted to divorce his wife and marry another woman name Anne. The Pope, would not grant him a divorce.

Out of rebellion, King Henry divorced her anyway and declared that England was no longer a Catholic country. He married Anne. Then to spite the Pope, King Henry commanded that there be an English Bible in every church in the country and be read in schools all across the land.

Not many years later, King James I would authorize yet another English Bible. His translators would use Tyndale's Bible as their foundation. 93% of the King James New Testament, used Tyndale's wording.

God, in His Providence, used yet another of His fearless men to continue preserving His Word.

Resources used in this lesson:

Christianity Through the Centuries, Earle E. Cairns, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1981

Fox's Book of Martyrs, John Fox, Edited by William Byron Forbush, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1954

William Tyndale, A Very Brief History, Melvyn Bragg, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Great Britain, 2017