

WILLIAM TYNDALE

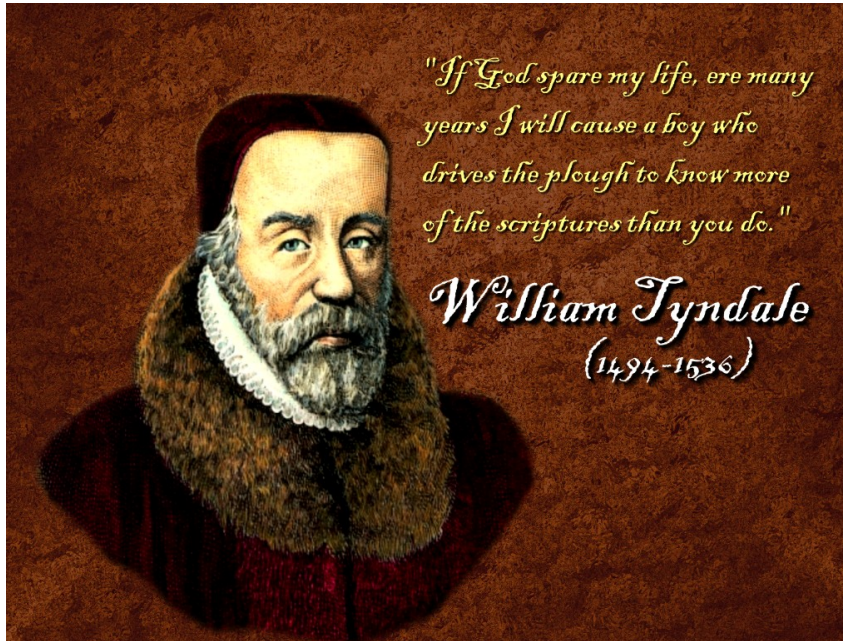
How many Bibles in the English language do you own? If you even have *one*, you owe that, by God's grace, to William Tyndale. For a thousand years before him, the only translation of the Greek and Hebrew Bible was the Latin Vulgate, and few people could understand it, even if they had access to it. When he translated the New Testament from the original Greek into English, it was the first time in history, and the first time the New Testament in English was available in a printed form.



William Tyndale has been called “The Father of the English Bible,” “God’s Outlaw,” and “The Man who Gave God an English Voice.” He was born in the early 1490s – likely 1494 – near the Welsh border of England. Spiritual conditions in his day were deplorable. Erasmus described it this way: *“No word of Christ is heard in the pulpits. I doubt whether in the whole history of Christianity the heads of the church have been so grossly worldly as at the present moment.”* Dean Colet of St. Paul’s said: *“Oh priests! Oh priesthood! Oh the detestable impiety of those miserable priests, of whom this age of ours contains a great multitude ... Abandoned creatures on whom the vengeance of God will one day fall the heavier, the more shamelessly they have intruded themselves on the divine office.”*

It was a superstitious age of relics. One church in Germany contained (supposedly) part of the rock on which Jesus wept, the gown and milk from Mary’s breast, some of the burning bush that Moses saw, 35 pieces of the cross of Christ, some hair of Christ, His coat and girdle, and a skeleton of one of the babies slaughtered in Bethlehem by Herod. Back in England, Canterbury housed “an amazing quantity of bones: skulls, jawbones, teeth, hands, fingers, whole arms,” all of which pilgrims adoringly kissed. The Cistercian Abbey at Boxley in Kent was one of the most significant shrines for pilgrims in the country. There, villagers and pilgrims passionately believed that the image of Mary actually smiled or frowned at their offerings, depending on the amount given. It was not until 1538 that they finally discovered that a clever system of “wires and pulleys cunningly hidden caused her eyes and lips to move.”

And much if not all of this darkness and superstition was due to the absence of the Bible. In 1390, all copies of the Wycliffe Bible, each painstakingly copied by hand, were ordered to be seized and burned. When John of Gaunt roared: *“Are we than the very dregs of humanity that we cannot possess the laws of our religion in our own tongue?”* the answer of the religious officials was the Constitutions of Oxford which made it illegal to possess or read any portion of the Bible in English without a bishop’s license -- and on pain of death; no one must preach without a bishop’s license, no building could be used for preaching unless it was registered for such, no preacher or teacher was allowed to criticize either the doctrine or practice of the church or its representatives, and no one should translate, own, or read any portion of the Bible in English without a license from his bishop. On April 4, 1519, a woman and six working men were burned in the Little Park in Coventry for teaching their children the 10 Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Apostles Creed in English. Unquestioning obedience to the Church was demanded, and the fearful specter of excommunication held every one in terrified obedience.



But Tyndale's study of the Bible gave him a deep desire to see the Scriptures available to everyone. John Foxe wrote that one day an exasperated Catholic scholar at dinner with Tyndale said, "We were better [to] be without God's law than the pope's." In response Tyndale spoke his famous words, "I defy the Pope and all his laws ... If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plow, shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost."

Tyndale was forced to flee to the continent. But in the spring of 1526, six thousand copies of his Bible were printed and smuggled into England in flour barrels, in trunks with false bottoms, and in airtight boxes inside wine barrels. The arrival of the English Bible was a spiritual explosion that set England on fire. The King condemned them to a public burning and persecuted all found guilty of possessing or distributing them. The bishops did everything they could to eradicate the Bibles. The Archbishop of Canterbury bought up copies to destroy them. The Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, had copies ceremoniously burned at St. Paul's. The story is told that Tunstall authorized a merchant trading in Antwerp to buy every

available volume and bring them back to London for burning. What Tunstall did not know was that the merchant was Tyndale's friend, and at the King's expense paid Tyndale four times the cost of production for each copy. So, for every Bible Tunstall burned, the King paid for three more to be added to Tyndale's arsenal. Some time later, a man who had been arrested for helping Tyndale was asked how Tyndale was able to do this. The man replied, "I will tell you truly, my lord. 'Tis yourself that gave us the money to print the Bibles!"

Tyndale's Bible was a monumental work that had a dramatic effect on the English language and on the history of the western world. Ninety percent of the King James Version of the Bible and 75% of the RSV are from his translation of the Bible into English. It has been said, "Tyndale's translation of the Bible molded the English language as we know it."

When Tyndale translated the Bible he had in mind that it would be read out loud. The practice of silent reading "in our head" is relatively modern. From its beginning, whether in synagogue or Christian meeting place, the Bible was a book to be read publicly, and in the 16th century even the university students in private study read to themselves aloud. Tyndale knew this and wanted his translation to "read well." Without diminishing the significance of John Wycliffe's translation which, by the end of the 15th century added hundreds of new words to the English language, the influence of Tyndale's translation was huge. The Shakespearean scholar, Prof. David Daniell of London University claims that it was Tyndale and not Shakespeare who shaped the English language. The Bible Shakespeare was most familiar with was known as the Geneva Bible – and that was largely Tyndale. "**No Tyndale, no Shakespeare**" is Daniell's summary.

Here is a sampling (and *merely* a sampling) of the English phrases we owe to Tyndale:

- "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3).
- "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9)
- "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (John 1:1).
- "There were shepherds abiding in the field" (Luke 2:8).

- “Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4).
- “Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name” (Matthew 6:9).
- “The signs of the times” (Matthew 16:3)
- “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41).
- “He went out ... and wept bitterly” (Matthew 26:75). [*I dare you to try to improve that! What would you say – he “cried really hard”?*]
- “A law unto themselves” (Romans 2:14)
- “In Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).
- “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels” (1 Corinthians 13:1)
- “Fight the good fight” (1 Timothy 6:12).

According to Daniell, *“The list of such near-proverbial phrases is endless.”* Five hundred years after his great work *“newspaper headlines still quote Tyndale, though unknowingly, and he has reached more people than even Shakespeare.”*



For daring to do this – to give the Bible to the common people – Tyndale was betrayed, captured, and condemned to death. John Foxe writes that Tyndale’s jailer and members of his household were converted by Tyndale’s quiet witness in his cell and that others in the castle confirmed that if Tyndale was not a true Christian, there was no such thing.

In 1536, in early October (traditionally October 6), he was tied to the stake and then strangled by the executioner; afterward he was burned at the stake. His last words were, ***“Lord! Open the King of England’s eyes!”*** He was forty-two years old.

No portrait of Tyndale was made in his lifetime. The inscription on his portrait in Hertford College, Oxford, admits that it represents him only as far as possible. Under his right hand which points to the Bible are the words:

***“To scatter Roman darkness by this light,
The loss of land and life I’ll reckon slight.”***

Within one year of William Tyndale’s death, the King of England gave approval for an English Bible to be published. Tyndale’s Bible was used as a guide for the new translation, and that new translation is the father of the King James Bible that is still read today.

Many Christians suffered horrible deaths to make it possible for us to have the Bible in the English language. How we should treasure this privilege! Tyndale’s words make his love for the Bible unmistakable:

“Scripture derives its authority from Him who sent it ... I call God to record that I have never altered, against the voice of my conscience, one syllable of His Word. Nor would do this day, if all the pleasures, honors, and riches of the Earth might be given me.”

William Tyndale wrote “the most influential book there has ever been in the history of language, English or any other”
(Melvin Bragg in *The Adventure of English*).