

# The Fearless Mission of William Tyndale (1494-1536) (2)

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William Tyndale had come to the realization that a spiritual reformation in England would never take place unless the Bible itself was translated into a language the people could read and understand for themselves. This had become Tyndale's mission in life.

Last time we ended with William Tyndale's decision that he must leave England, never to return, in order to carry out his life's work of translating the Bible into English.

## **His First Translation Published:**

In 1524, Tyndale went into exile and sailed from England to the European continent, never to set foot on his homeland again. The work he was going to undertake was without the permission of the king or the church. He was clearly choosing to make himself a fugitive and an outlaw. Everything he was about to undertake was illegal. The punishment he could expect to receive, if he were to get caught, was death. You and I enjoy our English Bibles because of the godly devotion and willing sacrifice of such men as William Tyndale.

So Tyndale sailed to Europe. Where did he go? For the next twelve years, until the end of his life, it is hard to keep track of Tyndale's travels. Tyndale was constantly in hiding. But let me ask you this: If you were to land on the European continent in 1524, where would you go first? To Wittenberg, Germany, of course, where Martin Luther was! (John Calvin was only fifteen years old at this time.)

It appears that as soon as Tyndale landed on the continent, he went to Wittenberg, Germany. And there, most likely, he met Martin Luther. And there, you can be sure, Tyndale received a great encouragement to take up his translation work. Only one year later, Tyndale would complete his translation of the Greek New Testament into English. This is the first ever translation from the original Greek into English.

But now Tyndale had to figure out how to publish his translation work. It is one thing to sit in hiding and translate the Bible; it is another thing to go out in public and try to hire someone to publish an illegal copy of the scriptures. Tyndale did find someone who was willing to publish his work, but it was an extremely dangerous enterprise. On one particular night, one of

the publishers who was printing Tyndale's New Testament drank a little too much wine, and began to speak too freely about the work he was doing. Soon enough, the wrong people found out, and a raid on the printing shop was arranged. In God's providence, before the authorities could catch Tyndale, he had gathered up his work, and left the city. In 1526, after Tyndale had moved to the city of Worms, he was able to publish his translation of the New Testament. Some 6000 copies were made. But now there was the difficulty of getting these forbidden Bibles back into England.

This is where we see how God's people were connected back then. In London, England, along the shipping yards on the Thames River, there was a German Lutheran community. These people were cloth merchants who were constantly bringing shipments of cotton from Germany to England. It was in these shipments, hidden among the cotton, that Tyndale's New Testament English Bibles were placed. The Bibles were shipped from Germany to London, and the German Lutherans would conceal these Bibles so that they could enter England safely. For the first time the New Testament Bible, for a very affordable price, was making its way into the homes of the English people. There was a whole underground network of transporting Bibles, and it was entirely illegal.

Of course, as soon as the authorities in England found out about what was going on, they were furious. The search for William Tyndale and his Bibles began. The authorities started burning Tyndale's Bibles, and tried to buy up every Tyndale Bible they could get their hands on. But that had two effects: first, it supplied Tyndale with the money he needed in order to edit his work, and produce a second edition; second, it made the people of England more curious about what Tyndale's Bible had in it, so that more and more the people wanted to get their own copies of the Bible. From this time on, the authorities wanted badly to capture Tyndale. They sent out spies into Europe to try to find where Tyndale was hiding. This lasted for the rest of Tyndale's life, until he was eventually caught.

### **His Continued Work:**

In 1529, Tyndale moved to Antwerp, in present-day Belgium, and began his translation of the first five books of the Old Testament from Hebrew to English. After he finished his translation, he realized he needed to move base because the English authorities were narrowing in on him. He gathered his things and set sail for Hamburg, Germany. However, on his way

through the North Sea, he was caught in a severe storm and the ship sank off the coast of Belgium and the Netherlands, and Tyndale lost all his translation of the five first books of Moses. He had to start all over again, spending another full year redoing the work he had lost. In 1530, Tyndale was able to publish his translation of the first five books of the Old Testament. They too began to make their way into England.

With this additional publication, the authorities became even more devoted in their search for Tyndale. His enemies started calling him horrible names: “The captain of English heretics,” “a hell-hound in the kennel of the devil,” “a new Judas,” “worse than Sodom and Gomorrah,” and “an idolater and devil-worshipper.” All Tyndale wanted was to see his fellow country-folk have a copy of the Bible in their own hands.

In 1534, in Antwerp, Tyndale moved in with a group of English merchants and fell under the care and support of a wealthy English merchant. He translated the book of Jonah, and he translated the books of Judges through 2 Chronicles. He continued to revise his New Testament translation. Tyndale’s goal was to translate the entire Old Testament, but he would be captured before he could finish this work.

### **His Capture and Death:**

Back in England, there was a man by the name of Henry Phillips. He was the son of a wealthy Englishman. One day, his father had given him a lot of money and had sent him to London to pay off some expenses. On his way to London, Phillips gambled and lost all the money his father had given him. Phillips became a desperate man, and was willing to do anything to recover the money he had lost. And so the Church of England came to Phillips, and hired him to capture William Tyndale.

In order to capture Tyndale, Phillips moved to Antwerp. He found where Tyndale was hiding, befriended Tyndale, and gained Tyndale’s trust. One day, as Tyndale and Phillips were going to lunch, Phillips led Tyndale into an alleyway and right into the hands of soldiers who had been waiting for him. After 12 years of being a fugitive for the sake of the gospel, Tyndale was captured and was thrown into a castle dungeon in Belgium.

After being in prison for a year and a half, on October 6, 1536, Tyndale was led to his death. He was taken out of the castle dungeon and paraded through the town to where his execution stake had been set up. His feet were bound to the pole, a chain was fastened around

his neck so that his back was right up against the pole. Wood was spread around his body. Gunpowder was sprinkled on the wood. The order came, and the chain went tight around Tyndale's neck. Tyndale gasped for breath, and the crowd of people watched him as he suffocated to death. Then, after he was dead, the wood was lit on fire. The fire touched the gunpowder, and Tyndale's body was blown up. What was left of it fell into the fire. That's how much the authorities hated him. However, before he died, these were Tyndale's last words: "Lord, open the king of England's eyes." Tyndale was 42 years old.

Why did Tyndale die with that prayer on his lips? Tyndale was praying that the king would see the need for God's people to have the Bible in their own hands. That prayer, in a way, would soon be answered: in 1538, only two years after Tyndale's death, King Henry VIII issued a decree that a copy of the Bible in English and Latin should be placed in every church in England. In 1539, only three years after Tyndale's martyrdom, Tyndale's own Bible became officially approved for publishing.

After Tyndale's death, other men picked up where he had left off. They used his work and were able to make a complete translation of the scriptures for English readers. Soon, complete Bibles were flowing into England. Soon, the boy in the field who was working the plough was reading the scriptures for himself. And soon, that same boy knew more about the Bible than the priests in the church. Tyndale not only put the Bible in the language of the people, but was an important instrument in God's hand to bring the Protestant Reformation to England. Brian Edwards, a biographer of Tyndale, goes so far as to say, "William Tyndale *was* the reformation in England."<sup>1</sup>

### **What Motivated Tyndale:**

One thing that stands out about William Tyndale's life is this: his devotion to the glory of God. Tyndale gave up his entire life to follow the Lord's will for him. And he lost his life because of it. Why? Why was Tyndale so devoted to this work?

Tyndale gave up his life to translate the Bible because Tyndale knew what the Bible was. He knew that the Bible was the inspired, infallible, authoritative word of God. And Tyndale knew that the scriptures are the gospel. And Tyndale knew what the gospel was. Even before

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<sup>1</sup> Brian H. Edwards, *God's Outlaw: The Story of William Tyndale and the English Bible* (Welwyn, Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press), 170. Besides the biography by Steven Lawson, this too is a shorter biography of William Tyndale's life that is very enjoyable to read.

John Calvin was on the scene, William Tyndale embraced what have become known as the five points of Calvinism. Tyndale emphasized God's sovereignty over everything. He knew that salvation is not by works. He knew that the Bible taught the total depravity of the human race. He knew that the Bible taught unconditional election. He knew all the other precious doctrines of sovereign, particular grace: irresistible grace, limited atonement, preservation of the saints. And Tyndale had personally experienced these things in his own life. He knew that he himself was an elect, redeemed, and regenerated child of God—a sinner saved by grace alone! He knew that Jesus Christ had died on the cross for his sins. And Tyndale's salvation was so precious to him that in thankfulness he wanted to give his life and use his gifts and abilities to the utmost of his power, so that his countrymen might come to know those precious truths as well, so that God might receive the glory.

Do you know the doctrines of grace? Do you know the riches of having your own personal Bible? Do you know that you are a sinner saved by grace alone? Then may God, in his grace, also give you the same kind of devotion that Tyndale had, the kind of devotion that says: "Here are all my gifts and abilities, Lord. I am thy willing servant. Here is my life. Use me for thy glory."

Originally Published in:

Vol 75 No 8 August 2016