

William Tyndale – Father of the English Bible

His Early Years:

- 1) William Tyndale was born in 1494 near Dursley, Gloucestershire in England.
- 2) In 1505 he enrolled at the University of Oxford where he received his Bachelor of Arts degree and then transferred to Cambridge University where he received a Master of Arts degree in July of 1515. He was ordained into the priesthood that same year. His Masters degree allowed him to start studying theology. The official course however did not include the study of the Scriptures, which deeply disturbed Tyndale. Thus he organized private groups where he read the Scriptures to fellow students, teaching and discussing with them the Word of God. John Foxe wrote concerning Tyndale's influence on his fellow students at Cambridge, "he read privately to some of the students and fellows of Magdalen College, in divinity; instructing them in the knowledge and truth of the Scriptures; and all that knew him reputed him to be a man of most virtuous disposition, and of unspotted life."
- 3) Tyndale was a gifted linguist. He was fluent in eight languages – Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Spanish, French, Italian, English and German. One of Tyndale's associates said of him that he was so fluent in eight languages that "whichever he speaks, you might think it is his native tongue!"
- 4) Around 1520, Tyndale left Cambridge and became the schoolmaster of the children of Sir John Walsh at Little Sodbury in Gloucestershire. By this time he had studied and embraced the doctrines that were held to by the reformers who came before him and openly shared his beliefs with fellow clergymen there. During the two year period that he spent at Little Sodbury he preached in open air meetings as well as in homes in the surrounding villages and debated with the local catholic priests. During one of his debates, a priest made the statement, "We are better to be without God's laws than the popes." Upon hearing this statement, Tyndale responded by saying, "I defy the Pope and all of his laws. If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause the boy that drives the plow to know more of the Scriptures than you!"

His View of Scripture:

- 1) Tyndale believed strongly in the sole authority of Scripture, and the need for the Word of God to be translated into the common language of the people. Tyndale wrote, "I perceived by experience, how it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the Scripture were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue, that they might see the process, order, and meaning of the text ... Who is so blind to ask why light should be showed to those who walk in darkness, where they cannot but stumble, and where to stumble, is the danger of eternal damnation."
- 2) This was exactly opposite to the view of the Roman Catholic Church. During this time, the translation of the Scriptures was considered to be heretical. In describing their view of this issue, Tyndale wrote, "Some of the papists say it is impossible to translate the Scriptures into English, some that it is not lawful for the lay folk to have it in their mother tongue, some that it would make them all heretics."
- 3) Thus, his bold exposure of the errors of Rome and his determination to translate the Scriptures into English drew the anger of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. In 1522 he was brought before the Chancellor Thomas Parker, who was appointed by Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, to answer for his "heretical" views. Tyndale said, "When I came before the Chancellor, he threatened me grievously, and reviled me, and rated me as though I had been a dog; and laid to my charge whereof there could be none accuser brought forth, as their manner is not to bring forth the accuser; and yet all the priests of the country were there the same day."
- 4) Following his initial confrontation with the authorities, he moved to London with the intention of beginning the work of translation.

The Work Begun:

- 1) Arriving in London, he was determined to do his translation work in England. During the few months that he was in London, he resided and was financially supported by Sir Humphrey Munmouth (Munmouth continued to support Tyndale's work during his

exile on the Continent. He later suffered persecution for the kindness and support that he had extended to Tyndale). William Tyndale began by presenting his plan to the Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, who immediately denounced the idea.

2) It was not long before Tyndale came to the conclusion that it would be impossible to complete translation of the Scriptures in England. King Henry the VIII, who was on the throne at that time, was designated by the pope "Defender of the Faith" for his rigorous defense of Roman Catholic doctrine. Thus the King was opposed to anyone desiring to embark on the work of translation. Because of this, no printer in England would dare publish a forbidden copy of the Scriptures. Tyndale wrote, "I understood that not only was there no room in my lord of London's palace to translate the New Testament, but also there was no place to do it in all England." Thus in January of 1524, Tyndale traveled to Europe to finish his translation work, not realizing that he would never return to his native land.

The Work Completed: 1) Tyndale first went to Hamburg and then to Wittenberg where it is believed that he completed his translation of the English New Testament, with the help of Martin Luther. 2) In the summer of 1525 the printing of the New Testament began in the City of Cologne. As printing had begun, a man by the name of John Dobneck, otherwise known as Cochlaeus, a man who was bitterly opposed to Martin Luther and the Protestant movement, learned that 3000 copies of Tyndale's translation were being printed with the intent of secretly transporting them to England. Cochlaeus immediately reported this to the authorities who ordered the printers to cease the work. Tyndale fled from Cologne with most of his completed manuscripts to the city of Worms where the printing was completed. 3) Cochlaeus sent a description of the format of Tyndale's translation to religious leaders in England in order that they might be able to detect its importation. In Worms, Tyndale had printed another edition which was issued prior to the first being completed. It is believed that it was smuggled into England before the first as its format was significantly smaller and thus would make it more difficult to detect. Most of them were smuggled into the country hidden in bales of merchandise. 4) In addition to the New Testament which was first printed in 1525 and 1526, Tyndale also translated the Pentateuch which was printed in 1530 and the Book of Jonah, printed in 1531. All of these works, and several other writings were completed in such concealed and secret places, that the authorities who were charged to hunt down and arrest Tyndale, were not able to find him, and even today, the exact location of Tyndale's hiding places remain a mystery.

Tyndale's Death: 1) During Tyndale's exile, King Henry VIII, desperately wanted to capture him and various individuals were sent out to seize him or to entice him to return to England. All attempts failed until he was finally apprehended in May of 1535. In 1534, Tyndale had moved to Antwerp and lived with a friend named Thomas Poyntz. He had lived there for almost one year before an informant named Henry Phillips and another man named Gabriel Donne, a Catholic monk, who posed as Phillip's servant, discovered him. After discovering him, Phillips gradually befriended Tyndale. One afternoon, Phillips invited Tyndale to his house for dinner where officers of Emperor Charles V were waiting to apprehend him. Tyndale was thus arrested and imprisoned in the castle of Vilvoorden for over 500 days in horrible conditions. 2) Tyndale was eventually convicted of heresy by the Roman authorities under the laws of the Inquisition and condemned to die. On the morning of October 6, 1536, Tyndale was led to the place of execution. He was tied to a stake, strangled, and then burned. His final words were, "Lord, open the king of England's eyes!" 3) This prayer was answered three years later when Henry VIII was persuaded by Cromwell to authorize an English Bible. When he did so, he did not realize at the time that the Bibles that he authorized largely contained the translation work of William Tyndale.