

*Footprints*



CHRISTIAN RESOURCES

GREAT PREACHERS

WILLIAM TYNDALE

TRANSLATOR AND MARTYR



Footprints into Africa

BISHOP WARWICK COLE-EDWARDES

John Foxe wrote: "William Tyndale, who for his notable pains and travail, may be worthily called an apostle of England". These are the words which Foxe places at the head of his sketch of the life of Tyndale, and no truer description of the man can be given.

## 1. EARLY LIFE

Of Tyndale's youth and early manhood little is known. It is established that he was born about 1484, possibly at the village of Slimbridge. The village of North Nibley lays some claim to be his birthplace, but it is certain that he began life in some part of the beautiful landscape which the eye of the traveller ranges over, when standing beside the monument erected in Tyndale's honour on Nibley Knoll.

Tyndale, like Athanasius, Luther and Knox, was specially fitted by God to do the work most needed in the days when he lived. The bonds of papal Rome were beginning to lose their hold on the English intellect and conscience. Political events were fast hastening to a rupture with papal authority. Wycliffe had prepared the way, and his MS. Bible and tracts had begun to dispel the darkness. Tyndale watched all these things with shrewd and observant eyes. His own county of Gloucester was reckoned amongst the most holy in all England. In it were no less than six mitred abbeys, churches innumerable, and that most precious relic, the blood of Hailes, the sight of which was supposed to ensure salvation.

## II TYNDALE'S VISION OF THE NEED OF HIS COUNTRYMEN TO HAVE THE WORD OF GOD IN THEIR OWN TONGUE

Tyndale entered Oxford about 1508 or 1509; he was admitted to the degree of B.A. July 4<sup>th</sup> 1512, and M.A. July 2<sup>nd</sup> 1515. From Oxford he passed to Cambridge. His removing to Cambridge was probably for the purpose of profiting by Erasmus' lectures who taught Greek there from 1509 till the beginning of 1514. How long Tyndale lived in Cambridge was probably for the purpose of profiting by Erasmus' lectures, who taught Greek there from 1509 till the beginning of 1514. How long Tyndale lived in Cambridge is not certainly known; but from thence he went about 1521 to be tutor to Sir John Walsh's children at the manor house of Little Sodbury, in Gloucestershire. It was at this time that Tyndale began his work as a translator. A passage in the writings of Erasmus reads thus:

I totally dissent from those who are unwilling that the sacred Scriptures, translated into the vulgar tongue, should be read by private individuals. I wish they were translated into all languages. I wish that the husbandman may sing parts of them at his plough, that the weaver may warble them at his shuttle".

It is true that Erasmus published the Greek New Testament; but he never, so far as we know, lifted his finger to bring about the accomplishment of his wish. The work needed a sterner type of character.

Tyndale, in his Preface to the Five Books of Moses, written long afterwards, traced for us his mental experience at this time. Speaking of the desire of the papists to suppress the Scriptures, he states:

“A thousand books had they rather to be put forth against their abominable doings and doctrines than that the Scripture should come to light..... which thing only moved me to translate the new Testament. Because I had perceived by experience, how that it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the Scriptures were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue, that they might see the process, order and meaning of the text: for else, whatsoever truth is taught them, these enemies of all truth quench it again”.

Here we find Tyndale’s sentiments entirely contrary to those expressed by the papacy, both before and since his day. The Synod of Toulouse in 1229 decreed: “We prohibit also the of the laity to have the books of the Old and the New Testament, unless anyone should wish, from a feeling of devotion, to have a psalter or breviary for Divine service, or the hours of the blessed Virgin. But we strictly forbid them to have the above-mentioned books in the vulgar tongue”. Liguori says (1696- 1787): “The Scriptures and books of controversies may not be permitted in the vulgar tongue, as they cannot be read without permission”. The index of Prohibited Books (Rule 4) thus declares: “Since it is manifest by experience, that if the sacred books be allowed to be circulated everywhere indiscriminately in the vulgar tongue, more harm than good would arise through the rashness of men in this respect, they must abide by the judgment of the bishop, or inquisitor, that they may be able, with the advice of the parish priest, or confessor, to allow the reading of these books .....

Popery dislikes Bible reading because, she confesses, it undermines her power, and reveals that her doctrine is not in harmony with the scriptures.

### III. **TYNDALE PURSUING HIS GOD-GIVEN TASK**

Whilst in discussion with a papist at Little Sodbury, Tyndale drove his disputant to this rash assertion: “We were better without God’s laws than the Pope’s. To this Tyndale re-joined:

“I defy the Pope and all his laws, 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 doest”.

These words set forth the toil to which henceforth he was to devote himself, in the accomplishment of which he was to be “in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of mine own countrymen..... in perils among false brethren” (2 Corinthians 11:26), and for which at last he was to lay down his life.

Tunstall, Bishop of London, had a reputation for learning and liberality to scholars, and has been praised by Erasmus. Tyndale wrote:

“Then thought I, if I might come to this man’s service, I were happy..... And so, in London I abode a whole year, and understood at the last not only that there was no room in my Lord of London’s palace to translate the New Testament, but also that there was no place to do it in England”.

#### **IV. TYNDALE LEFT HIS NATIVE LAND, NEVER TO SEE HER SHORE AS AGAIN, AND LANDED AT HAMBURG IN 1524.**

“Every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren ..... or lands, for my name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life” (Matthew 19:29). Tyndale continued with his task of translation, and in 1526 completed his English New Testament, which since has been one of the mightiest influences upon English life and thought.

Consignments of the wonderful book probably reached England about the middle of 1526. Tunstal, the Bishop of London, denounced the book, and it was resolved that the book should be burned wherever found. Tunstall preached against the book of Paul’s Cross, and at the close of his discourses the book was flung into the blazing bonfire.

An instance of recent years in Belgium is known to the write of the article, of one converted to Christ from popery, who was required to burn her Bible by a visiting priest. Her reply was: “I would sooner lose all I possess than that book. “The Scriptures have also been burned in Spain in the present century.

#### **V THE EXAMPLE AND EXPERIENCES OF TYNDALE HAVE MEANING FOR US TODAY**

In spite of opposition from statesmen and bishops, God wrought His purpose through Tyndale. As said Bishop J C Ryle, “Happy is he who has learned to expect little from Parliaments and Convocations, from Statesmen or from Bishops, and to look steadfastly for Christ’s appearing! He is the man who will not be disappointed”. (Coming events and present duties, Preface, page 13).

Sir Thomas More and Bishop Fisher were two of Tyndale’s most powerful antagonists, who have been canonised by the pope during the twentieth century. Had their views prevailed, England would not have enjoyed the liberties which have proceeded from Tyndale’s accomplishment. God is still able and will fulfil His purpose, despite opposition in high places.

Tyndale was betrayed into the hands of his enemies at Antwerp in 1534, and thence taken to Vilvorde Castle, where he lingered in prison for over a year. During that time Tyndale wrote a letter to the governor of the castle, an extract of which is as follows:

Mistreat your Lordship, and that by the Lord Jesus; that if I am to remain here (in Vilvorde) during the winter, you will request the Procurer to be kind enough to send me from my goods which he has in his possession, a warmer cap, for I suffer extremely from the cold in the head..... a warmer coat also. But above all, I entreat and beseech your clemency to be urgent with the Procurer that he may kindly permit me to have my Hebrew Bible, Hebrew Grammar, and Hebrew Dictionary, that I may spend my time with that study”.

Tyndale was later condemned, brought forth to the place of execution, was there tied to the stake, and then strangled first by the hangman, and afterwards consumed with fire in the morning, at Vilvorde, 1536, crying thus at the stake with a fervent zeal and loud voice: "Lord! open the King of England's eyes!"

The articles alleged against Tyndale were: First, he had maintained that faith alone justifies. Second, he maintained that to believe in the forgiveness of sins, and to embrace the mercy offered in the Gospel, was enough for salvation. Third, he averred that human traditions cannot bind the conscience, except where their neglect might occasion scandal. Fourth, he denied the freedom of the will. Fifth, he denied that there is any purgatory. Sixth, he affirmed that neither the Virgin nor the saints pray for us in their own person. Seventh, he asserted that neither Virgin nor saints should be invoked by us.

Tyndale's dying prayer was not in vain, as in 1538 the Bible in English was by royal decree required to be set up in every parish church in the land. Tyndale wrote much upon prayer. Prayer is a mourning, a longing, and a desire of the spirit to God-ward, for that which she lacketh; as a sick man mourneth and sorroweth in his heart, longing for health. Faith ever prayeth. For after that we are reconciled to God, and have received mercy and forgiveness of God, the spirit longeth and thirsteth for strength to do the will of God, and that God may be honoured, His name hallowed, and His pleasure and will fulfilled". (Tyndale's Doctrinal Treatises, Parker Society, p 93).

Oh, that we might pray today, that the eyes of our leaders may be opened of the Lord: "The Lord openeth the eyes of the blind". (Psalm 146:8).

Monuments have been erected to Tyndale at Vilvorde, the Thames Embankment, and Nibley Knoll; but his abiding monument is the English Bible.