

# William Tyndale



J. R. Broome

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by

**J. R. BROOME**

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William Tyndale was born about 1495 in Gloucestershire. Little is known about his home or upbringing, or where he went to school. He gained entrance to Oxford University, however, and took his M.A. there at Magdalen Hall in 1515 when he was about twenty. His subject was Classics, and he was a great scholar in it. It was said that he was skilful in six languages—Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish and French—so that whichever he spoke, one would think it was his native tongue. His language ability was the talent God had given him, and history tells us how well he used it in the Lord’s service. Oxford, in the year after he graduated, was the city of the New Testament, for in 1516 Erasmus, the Dutch scholar, had published the New Testament in Greek, its original language, together with a parallel Latin translation. In reading it Tyndale came to see its hidden depths, and the work of grace was begun in his heart. His immediate reaction was to tell others, with the result that he came at once into conflict with the monks and staunch Catholics. This was possibly the reason why he left Oxford and went to Cambridge, which he did about 1517.

There he found others of the same persuasion as himself. John Frith, from Westerham in Kent, was at King’s College—he was only eighteen and was studying mathematics. Foxe says, “Through [Tyndale’s] instructions [Frith] first received into his heart the seed of the gospel and sincere godliness.” Before Tyndale’s arrival, another student, Bilney, had been led to a knowledge of the truth in reading Erasmus’ Greek New Testament. He says of his experience: “But at the last I heard speak of Jesus, even then when the New Testament was first set forth by Erasmus; which understanding to be eloquently done by him, being allured rather by the Latin than for the Word of God (for at that time I knew not what it meant,) I bought it even by the providence of God, as I do now well understand and perceive: and at the first reading (as I well remember) I chanced upon this sentence of St. Paul, (O most sweet and comfortable

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sentence to my soul!) in I Timothy 1.15, 'It is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be embraced, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am the chief and principal.' This one sentence, through God's instruction and inward working, which I did not then perceive, did so exhilarate my heart, being before wounded with the guilt of my sins, and being almost in despair, that immediately I felt a marvellous comfort and quietness, insomuch that my bruised bones leaped for joy." What a telling account this is! The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the same in the sixteenth century as now, working in the hearts of His dear people—the message of the gospel just the same, bringing peace and pardon to the soul!

So Tyndale found some companions in Cambridge taught of God as he had been. Together they set to work to declare that neither the absolution of a priest nor any other religious rite could bring forgiveness. The assurance of pardon came through faith, and this led them to preach repentance. Speaking of the power of the ministry in salvation, Bilney had scandalised the Cambridge dons by saying, "What would be the use of being a hundred times consecrated [by a Bishop] if the inward call was wanting? To no purpose hath the Bishop breathed on our heads if we have never felt the breath of the Holy Ghost in our hearts." Such was the result of the inward call which Bilney had felt in his own heart.

Tyndale left Cambridge about 1521, having seen the beginnings of the Reformation in both English universities within a few years of Luther's work having been begun at Wittenberg in 1517, the origin of the movement in England, naturally speaking, stemming from the Greek New Testament of Erasmus. This needs a little explanation. The Bible up to this time had been known in Europe in the Latin edition of the Catholic Vulgate and had been kept exclusively in the hands of the priests, and thus out of reach of the common people. With the publication of Erasmus' Greek New Testament, the Bible was produced, for the first time for many centuries, in the language in which it had been originally written, and this, with the revival of the study of Greek at the beginning of the sixteenth century, aroused much interest.

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Also, this was just after the time of the advent of printing. Bibles at this time were handwritten manuscripts. Now with the printing of the Greek New Testament the gospel became available in a more easily accessible form, much cheaper and in far greater quantities than ever before. Being in Greek, at first it was confined to scholars, but it became Tyndale's ambition to use the Greek New Testament as the basis for a translation into English. The question was, where could he do this work?

On the southern slopes of the Cotswolds was a large house, the Manor House of Little Sodbury, commanding an extensive view of the Severn valley, where it is probable Tyndale had been born. Here lived the family of Sir John Walsh, who kept open house for gentry, deans, abbots, Doctors of Divinity and other men of learning. When Tyndale left Cambridge, Sir John Walsh asked him to come to Little Sodbury to educate his children and act as private tutor to his family. Tyndale was now about twenty-five. His principal ambition was to spread the truth of the gospel, and opportunities were not wanting in this household and among its visitors. Here in conversations at the meal table about the Greek New Testament and the writings of Luther, the seeds of the Reformation were sown. Foxe says of these conversations with deans, abbots and local gentry at the table of Sir John Walsh that "when they at any time did vary from Tyndale in opinions and judgment, he [Tyndale] would show them in the book" (i.e. his Greek New Testament). What a wonderful picture it presents of the early spread of the truth in this country, with the humble Oxford and Cambridge scholar gone forth to do his Master's bidding.

In conversation Tyndale said, "The Scriptures are a clue which we must follow, without turning aside, until we arrive at Christ; for Christ is the end." "I tell you," said a priest, "that the Scriptures are a ... labyrinth ... a conjuring book, wherein everybody finds what he wants." "Alas," replied Tyndale, "you read them without Jesus Christ; that is why they are an obscure book to you ... a thicket of thorns where you only escape from the briars to be caught by the brambles." "No!" exclaimed another priest, "nothing is obscure to us; it is we [the Church] who give the

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Scriptures, and we who explain them to you.” Replied Tyndale, “Do you know who taught the eagles to find their prey? Well, that same God teaches His hungry children to spy out their Lord and trace out the paths of His feet and follow ... His elect know him, but the world knows Him not. And as for you, far from having given us the Scriptures, it is you who have hidden them from us; it is you who burn those who teach them, and if you could you would burn the Scriptures themselves.” Not satisfied with merely stating the truth, Tyndale always sought what he called “the sweet marrow within.” When his opponents advocated the power of the Church, he replied, “Let us only take on board our ship the anchor of faith in Christ’s blood; let us secure it by the cable of love; and when the storm bursts upon us, let us boldly cast the anchor into the sea; then you may be sure the ship will remain safe in the great waters.”

On Sundays Tyndale preached in the church behind the Manor House at Little Sodbury. His sermons annoyed the local priests and they determined to ruin him in the eyes of his patron. Accordingly, a number of them went to Sir John Walsh and his wife and condemned Tyndale and his Greek New Testament, so that his patron became worried that Tyndale had made so many enemies. He called Tyndale to explain what he was doing, pointing out that he was being criticised by very learned men, while he himself was only a young scholar. Was it reasonable, he asked, for Tyndale to be right in the face of all this learning? Tyndale was silent at this, but as the weeks went by, Sir John and his wife became convinced that Tyndale was right in his interpretation of Scripture and the love he had for it, and that he was teaching them the pure gospel.

Before long Tyndale’s village at Little Sodbury was too small for his zeal, and he began to move abroad, preaching on Sundays sometimes in other villages or local towns. He preached at Bristol in a large meadow called St. Austin’s Green. The local priest at once branded him as a heretic, and threatened to expel from the Church everyone who went to hear him. (It reminds us of another great preacher whose itinerant ministry began near Bristol—namely George Whitefield who preached to the miners at Kingswood.) Seeing his congregation dwindling

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through fear, Tyndale exclaimed, "What is to be done? While I am sowing in one place the enemy ravages the field I have just left. I cannot be everywhere. Oh! if Christians possessed the Holy Scriptures in their own tongue, they could of themselves withstand these attackers. Without the Bible it is impossible to establish the common people in the truth."

This forced on Tyndale's mind the necessity of translating the Scriptures into English. So while on his itinerant ministry from Little Sodbury he was led to see what must be the great work of his life. At the Manor House a change had now taken place. No longer was it frequented by the Catholic clergy. Now that his patrons were grounded in the Reformed truths, these men were no longer so welcome as before, nor did they feel so much at home. The clergy thought now of only one thing—how they could drive Tyndale out of the diocese. He was reported by local priests to the Chancellor of the diocese as a heretic. He had to appear before an Ecclesiastical Court, but as no witnesses could be found to give evidence against him, the Chancellor abandoned the case and Tyndale returned to Little Sodbury, thankful to God for preserving him.

When the priests saw that they had failed to convict Tyndale, they hit upon the idea of trying to prove to him his errors. Little did they understand how God the Holy Spirit had taught him in his heart and how futile was their task. A Catholic theologian was sent to argue with him about his Greek New Testament. After much discussion the man expressed great amazement at Tyndale's knowledge and understanding of the book. Seeing the effect reading it had had on Tyndale, turning him against Catholic doctrines, he said to Tyndale that he thought it were "better to be without God's laws than the Pope's." This blasphemous remark so horrified Tyndale that he replied with great zeal, "I defy the Pope and all his laws. If God spare my life, ere many years I will take care that a ploughboy shall know more of the Scriptures than you do."

And so he began his work. In the library at Little Sodbury he spent much of his time in reading, prayer and translating the Scriptures. He



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talked little about his plan outside the Manor House, because he feared he would be stopped if it became known to the bishops. But the theologian to whom he had talked had spread the news of his intention. The local clergy now openly abused him and told him, "You shall not always live in a Manor House," the threat being that before long he would be imprisoned as a heretic. Tyndale saw that he was in danger of being arrested, and his work stopped. He felt the need to retreat to a place where he could work in peace. He told Sir John Walsh, "You cannot save me from the hands of the priests, and God knows to what trouble you will expose yourself by keeping me in your family. Permit me to leave you." And so with the permission of his patron he went forth alone, like Abraham, in faith, to find a place of safety where he could translate the Scriptures into English unmolested. The time of his departure was probably about the year 1523.

Tyndale made first for London on leaving Little Sodbury. The Bishop of London at the time was called Cuthbert Tunstall and was a Greek and Latin scholar himself. It was Tyndale's hope that he would provide him with a place in which he could do his translation work. He had been recommended by Sir John Walsh to Sir Harry Guildford, the Controller of the Royal Household of Henry VIII, and by him to several priests, so that soon Tyndale was preaching in London, especially at St. Dunstan's-in-the-West, and the glorious truth of the gospel was being heard in the capital. But translation work was on his mind, and so he asked Sir Harry Guildford to approach the Bishop of London on his behalf. Sir Harry did so and the Bishop said he would be pleased to hear from Tyndale personally. He wrote and later had an interview with the Bishop, only to be told that there was no place for him in the Bishop's Palace for such work.

But God had made provision for him. In his congregation at St. Dunstan's was a wealthy merchant who, when Tyndale told him of the Bishop's refusal, offered Tyndale the facilities of his own home and library. At the same time John Frith came down from Cambridge, and in the quiet of the home of this merchant, Henry Monmouth, and within a

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few yards of the Bishop's Palace, these two got to work to translate the Greek New Testament into English. While the work was in progress, persecution started in London of those who read the writings of Luther, which had come to England from the Continent. Tyndale realised at once that if he were found out in his work, he would also suffer persecution. And so, with ten pounds given to him by Henry Monmouth, and his Greek New Testament and translation papers, he sailed from London for Hamburg, hoping to find more peace abroad to carry out his plans. Under a portrait of him in Hertford College, Oxford, is an inscription in Latin. Translated it reads, "In order to disperse your dark shadows, Church of Rome, willingly I will be an exile, willingly a sacrifice."

Now an exile on the Continent, with little money and moving from place to place to avoid detection, it becomes difficult to follow Tyndale's movements exactly in the year after he left England, i.e. 1524-25. It seems that having arrived in Hamburg he stayed there for a little while, and with the help of a man named William Roye translated the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. Probably in the late spring of 1524 he went to Wittenberg and stayed about a year. There is some evidence that he met Luther, though there is no reference to the meeting in any of Luther's writings. He must have then worked very hard at his translation work, for by the middle of 1525 he had gone to Cologne and the printing of the New Testament had started, with an edition of three thousand copies, quarto size.

Money was being transmitted to him, via Hamburg, by Henry Monmouth and it seems this must have been on a fairly large scale to finance the edition, seeing Tyndale himself had no means to pay. But the printing had only reached the eightieth page of this quarto edition when the Catholic authorities in Cologne got wind of it and ordered the printer to stop. Tyndale acted quickly. He went to the printer's warehouse, collected the printed pages so far done, and took a boat up the River Rhine with Roye to the city of Worms. When the officers of the Council

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of Cologne reached the printing works, they were astonished to find that Tyndale had eluded them and taken the valuable pages.

What a scene of danger this presents! How it reminds us of Paul's escape from Damascus, being let down in a basket at night! (Acts 9.25). What these men suffered in the days of the Reformation, risking their lives for the sake of the gospel! Eighty pages of a three thousand edition was a considerable quantity of paper to be stowed in bales on a Rhine barge. But all was overruled of God and Tyndale escaped with his precious cargo. After a voyage of five or six days, probably in October 1525, he reached Worms, the same city where Luther, four years before in 1521, had faced the great Imperial Diet. He knew that the gospel was preached in this city, and though expecting his enemies to pursue him, he hoped to get the work done in time.

He decided to change the printing now from a quarto edition to a smaller, more easily handled, octavo edition, and leave out the prologue he had written and the notes in the margins, all probably done to hasten the printing of the actual English text. Peter Schaffer was his printer and about the end of 1525 or early in 1526 two editions were quietly completed. Of these two editions, and the one partly completed at Cologne, there now survive only a very few copies. One single copy of the Cologne quarto edition of eighty pages is known to exist and is now in the British Museum. The eighty pages contain the original prologue and marginal notes. Of the two octavo editions printed at Worms, there exist one copy in the Baptist College Library at Bristol and another in St. Paul's Cathedral Library.

About March 1526 the two editions from Worms began to come to England via Antwerp and Rotterdam, their route and safety no doubt organised by Henry Monmouth and his friends in London. The story is that they came in small batches hidden in bales of cloth imported into this country from Flanders. They were brought ashore at London and hidden in the house of the Curate of All-Hallows Church, Honey Lane, Cheapside. His name was Thomas Garret. He was later burned as a