

The Story of the English Bible

The books of the Bible were originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. None of the writers of Holy Scripture spoke the English language. The story of how the Bible came to be translated into English is one of intrigue, heartache, suffering and great personal sacrifice. The men and women who labored to give us an English Bible demonstrated great courage, conviction and commitment.

Today we can own, for a very reasonable cost, numerous personal copies of the Bible, God's Holy Word. The Bible is available today in many translations and is freely distributed wherever it is wanted. It has been translated into appo. 2233 different languages.

We need to remember that all this wealth of Bibles came at a high cost.

Men and women gladly allowed themselves to be fastened to stakes. Wood was piled high and then their bodies were burned. Execution by burning was a slow, gruesome way to die. If the wind was blowing the right way, one side of the body would char and burn while the other side would slowly roast to death. The account is given of a martyr who was able to reach over with his left hand and remove his roasted right arm at the shoulder and drop it into the fire.

These men and women languished in cold, dark, damp prison cells. They tossed on beds of straw or the hard, cold floor. They endured sickness, hunger, pain and loneliness while they awaited execution.

In 1511 Andreas Ammonius, the Latin Secretary of Henry VIII, said, "...that wood has grown scarce and dear because so much was needed to burn heretics, and yet their numbers grow." -A History of the Reformation, by Thomas M. Lindsay, DD, LLD

In the 12th century in England the Roman Church controlled the reproduction and reading of the Bible. The official Bible was the Latin Vulgate translated by

Jerome around 400 AD. This Latin Bible reigned supreme as the Bible for 1000 years. It was a crime punishable by death to translate it into English.

Of course, no one but scholars could read it. In this way the Catholic Church kept a tight control on the people by telling them what they wanted them to know about what the Bible said.

The Roman hierarchy became rich, powerful and decadent. They imposed their will on the people and ruthlessly persecuted and killed anybody who dared to question their authority or who tried to translate or preach from the Bible in the English language.

In 1531 divinity students were required to take an oath to renounce the doctrines of Wycliffe, Hus and Luther. -A History of the Reformation, by Thomas M. Lindsay, DD, LLD

It is this background of persecution and arrogance toward God's Word that the reformers we will speak about faced. Rome was determined to keep God's Word from the people. These reformers were determined to give the common people God's words in their language. It was an explosive situation that could not be compromised and for which 1000s of men and women gave their lives.

Parts of the Bible had been translated into Old English as early as 735 AD. But we would like to begin our story in the 14th century with a man named John Wycliffe.

Wycliffe is known as the "Morning Star" of the reformation. He was a brilliant scholar and churchman. He championed social and religious reforms in his native England. He maintained strongly "that every person should be able to read the Bible and learn the words of the gospel according to its simplicity."

Wycliffe was born in 1320 and lived till 1384. He was president of Oxford University and was pastor at Lutterworth. At Lutterworth he had many helpers engaged in the business of hand-copying manuscripts of an English translation of the Latin Vulgate. There is debate among scholars as to his involvement in the actual translation work, but he was the driving force behind the work.

He trained and sent out a group of preacher boys called Lollards. This was a mark of derision which meant either a vagabond or a tare. The Lollards went throughout England preaching the Bible to the people in English. Each of these Lollards knew that he may be going out to die. Wycliffe supplied each of them with a hand-copied English Bible or portion of the Bible. The printing press would not be invented till appo. 1450 AD.

These Bibles were incredibly costly.

The cost of the Bible was 40 lbs.

There were 240 pennies in a pound.

In 40 lbs. there were 9600 pennies.

2 pennies would buy a chicken.

4 pennies would buy a hog. The price of one Bible was equal to the value of 2400 hogs. Or in today's money, it would be over \$200,000!

Men worked in the fields for a whole month and brought the entire earnings to purchase a single page of John Wycliffe's English Bible.

Every time a Lollard was found he was arrested and publicly burned to death with the copy of his Bible chained to his neck. Even though 100s of these handmade Bibles were burned, even though it took 10 months to produce each Bible, today there are still 170 copies of John Wycliffe's Bible in existence!

John Wycliffe was tried 3 times for heresy but not found guilty. He was forced to leave his beloved Oxford and was hounded by the authorities. He returned to his church at Lutterworth, and it was there, while preaching, that he collapsed from a stroke. He was taken out a side door and lovingly put to bed. He never spoke again till two days later, in the presence of angels, he spoke to his blessed Lord in heaven.

The church reasoned that people who were guilty of heresy (which was defined as opposition to the church and her rules) should be punished as God punishes sinners—by burning. So the usual punishment for heretics was death by burning. They couldn't execute Wycliffe. He was already dead. 44 years after his death

though, the pope issued orders that his body be exhumed, his bones burned and the ashes be thrown into the River Swift.

In their superstitious and pagan thinking they reasoned that this would spoil Wycliffe's chance of Resurrection.

They thought they were closing the door on reform in England. But as the River Swift flows into the Avon and the Avon into the Severon and the Severon into the Bristol Channel which empties out into the oceans of the world, so John Wycliffe's followers became an unstoppable force for reformation in England.

Wycliffe taught his Lollards 4 things:

1. The first thing he taught them was how to live. When they went out they had coarse clothing and no shoes on their feet. They were specifically instructed not to beg. If their needs were not provided for they were to work.
2. The second thing the Lollards learned from Wycliffe was how to preach. They would argue against what the church taught.

John Wycliffe, one of the greatest theological brains of his day understood two things and taught his Lollards that:

- a. Every man / woman is personally responsible to God alone for his soul's salvation and...
- b. He understood, and taught, that the people needed the Scriptures in their own language in order to follow God.

The church / pope said, "The people are ignorant. They should not have the Bible in their own language. They need to follow what the pope and priests tell them about the Bible." Bishop Arundel wrote around 1411, "This pestilent and wretched John Wycliffe...that son of the old serpent...endeavored...to fill up the measure of his malice...[by]...the expedient of a new translation of the Scriptures into the mother tongue."

Three basis hurdles an English translation had to cross:

- (1) Latin was believed to be the proper language for religious expression.

(2) The clergy were afraid unorthodox teaching would result if the people had the Scripture in English.

(3) English was unsuitable for religious expression.

The Lollards gave the people the Word of God, in English. They preached from its pages, expounded its message and refuted the lies that were being taught to them by the church.

3. The third thing he taught the Lollards was how to reproduce. These men were called upon to give their lives for the faith. Going out as a Lollard preacher usually meant a death sentence. So they had to reproduce themselves or they would be stamped out very quickly. They learned the lesson well. Appo. 60 years after Wycliffe's death there was a giant riot in the city of Prague because of Wycliffe's influence. In England 10 years after Wycliffe's death it was said that if you met 2 men on the street, one of them would be a Lollard.

In 1521, "The Bishop of London arrested 500 Lollards."

-A History of the Reformation, by Thomas M. Lindsay, DD, LLD

145 years after Wycliffe's death, the Bishop of England wrote to Erasmus complaining that the NT of William Tyndale "added great fuel to the fires of the Lollards" showing that they were in existence 145 years after Wycliffe's death.

4. The fourth thing the Lollards learned from Wycliffe was how to die.

Wycliffe and the Lollards knew that the end result of their activities would probably be death. They considered it a sufficient price to pay to awaken the conscience of the land of England.

The "Lollards' pit" was so named because of the large number of Lollards who were burnd there. Smithfield in London was a place where many Lollards were burned to death .

John Lambert in appo. 1539 was found guilty of heresy. He was taken to Smithfield for burning. Many of London's citizens gathered to watch. The execution was particularly gruesome. After his legs had burned to stumps his tormentors withdrew most of the fire. Two of them stood on each side and impaled his upper body with their pikes. They held him up so he could not fall into the fire. Many in the crowd groaned and cried with pity. Then the fat in his

fingertips caught fire and he lifted his hands heavenward. With fire shooting out of all 10 fingers Lambert cried, "None but Christ, None but Christ!" At that his tormentors allowed him to fall into the fire and there he gave up his life for Christ.

Wycliffe taught his Lollards how to die. Have you thought through your reaction to this kind of threat? We in America have been immune to persecution. There are those who teach that God will protect his people from persecution. As I examine the pages of Scripture I see no guarantee that followers of Christ will be spared from persecution. On the contrary we are warned over and over again to be prepared to suffer for the cause of Christ. It will only be the person who knows his faith is worth dying for who will stand true to Christ during any coming persecution.

Erasmus was born in Rotterdam, Holland in 1457. He was no fundamental scholar. There were many things wrong with his beliefs and actions. He was a humanist. He believed that a man could be saved by college, not by Calvary. He had a taste for high living, and to earn extra money he taught Greek. To learn about Greek he collected Greek documents. He came into possession of Greek manuscripts of the NT.

In 1511 at the Queen's College he translate those Greek documents into Latin. His New Testament was a huge book with double columns—Greek on one side, Latin on the other. –Totally written by hand! The book was immediately banned by the king.

In 1517 a student priest at Cambridge named Thomas Billney became dissatisfied with the church's teaching about salvation. Since he was training to be a priest he had to do all the things his people would do— confession, the mass, penance. He found that these things did not bring him peace and determined that he was the Judas of his generation. He decided to go out and sin by obtaining a copy of Erasmus' forbidden New Testament. He hid it in the folds of his priest's garments and returned to the university. There he found a candle and under the covers of his bed he began to read the NT of Erasmus. As he was reading he came to 1 Timothy 1:15..." **This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.**" He realized that salvation didn't come from confession, the mass, doing good works or penance, but through faith in Jesus

Christ. He was never to be the same. He became the first convert of the Reformation.

He took his New Testament to the White Horse Inn, which was a bar, close to Cambridge University. There he discussed the NT with the leading professors of Cambridge. Many of them came to faith in Christ. Because of this illegal activity Bilney was arrested for heresy and brought before a council of Bishops who so frightened him that he recanted. Later he realized how wrong the recantation was and withdrew it. He was condemned to death by burning as an "obstinate heretic."

Before he was burned Bilney held his finger to a candle till it was thoroughly burned. He said, "This finger wrote the recantation— It will be the first to burn." When chained to the stake, he smiled to all who were there and said, "I have had many storms in this world, but soon my vessel will be on shore in heaven." As the flames roared around him he stood unmoved and cried out, "Jesus, I believe." Then he went to meet Him in whom he believed.

One of the students at Cambridge who was influenced by Thomas Bilney was a remarkable young man named William Tyndale. He knew 7 different languages. He was so fluent in them that it was said that no man could determine which was his native tongue.

Tyndale often debated with church officials he came in contact with. One day one of them said to Tyndale, "We had rather be without God's law than the pope's law."

Tyndale fired back, "I defy the pope and all his laws. And if God spare me I will one day make the boy that drives the plow in England to know more Scripture than thou dost!"

Tyndale was hired by Mr. John Walsh to tutor his two sons. Tyndale knew the powerful effect the Scriptures had upon scholars and his passion was to produce a New Testament in English. He worked on the translation for appo. 6 mo. and then, fearing he was jeopardizing the safety of the Walshes, he went to London to try to get the Bishop of London to authorize the translation work.

The Bishop's name was Tonsall. He refused permission to translate. Then Tyndale made one of the most heart-wrenching decisions of his young life. Even

though he loved his homeland with all his heart, he went to Europe where he would be allowed to translate. He was never to see his native England again.

He went to Germany and visited Luther. He completed the work of translating the NT and began the work of having it printed.

The English authorities had decided to do everything in their power to prevent the printing of the Tyndale NT. They put a price on his head. They sent agents to arrest him and seize and destroy his documents. He lived in poverty, fleeing the authorities. On one occasion he was in the rear of the print shop. The arresting officers came in the front door. He quickly gathered up what he could and fled out the back door.

He lived like that for several years with a passion to complete the work. In December 1525 the NT was printed. Now he had to figure out a way to get it into England. He came up with a simple idea. He concealed the Bibles in sacks of flour and bales of clothing and smuggled them into England. 1000s of Bibles, 2 or 3 in a sack of flour or a bale, every one brought in at the risk of someone's life.

Bishop Tostall who we met before was dead set against the printing of the Bibles. He actively searched for and destroyed them. He did a good job. Of approximately 6000 copies of the first edition of Tyndale's NT only one remains today.

Humorous story about Tostall:

He determined to search out the testaments on the continent and destroy them. He hired an agent who had contacts within Europe. He asked him to go to Europe and find the Bibles and buy them for him. What Tostall didn't realize was that the agent was a friend of Tyndale's! He went to Tyndale and said, "I have a right good buyer for your books."

Tyndale asked who it was, and when he was told that it was Tostall he protested, saying, "He will burn them."

The agent smiled and said, "Yes he will. But what's the harm! I will charge him 4 times the price. He will have the books. You will have the money to revise and reprint 4 times as many Bibles."

Tyndale agreed and the Bishop burned the testaments not realizing that he was financing the next edition.

On May 21, 1535 Tyndale was treacherously betrayed and kidnapped by a man who he trusted. He had wormed his way into Tyndale's confidence and on the pretense of taking him for supper arranged to have him seized. He was taken to Vilvorde, 6 miles north of Brussels, where he remained a prisoner for appo. 18 months.

A very poignant letter survives from his imprisonment, apparently written from his prison cell before the first winter of his incarceration. Note the gentle tone. This man was waiting execution. He had been illegally kidnapped.

I believe, right worshipful, that you are not unaware of what may have been determined concerning me. Wherefore I beg your lordship, and that by the Lord Jesus, that if I am to remain here through the winter, you will request the commissary to have the kindness to send me, from the goods of mine which he has, a warmer cap; for I suffer greatly from cold in the head, and am afflicted by a perpetual catarrh, which is much increased in this cell; a warmer coat also, for this which I have is very thin; a piece of cloth too to patch my leggings. My overcoat is worn out; my shirts are also worn out. He has a woolen shirt, if he will be good enough to send it. I have also with him leggings of thicker cloth to put on above; he has also warmer night caps. And I ask to be allowed to have a lamp in the evening; it is indeed wearisome sitting alone in the dark. But most of all I beg and beseech your clemency to be urgent with the commissary, that he will kindly permit me to have the Hebrew Bible, Hebrew grammar, and Hebrew dictionary, that I may pass the time in that study. In return may you obtain what you most desire, provided that it be consistent with the salvation of your soul. But if any other decision has been taken concerning me, to be carried out before winter, I will be patient, abiding the will of God, to the glory of the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ, whose Spirit (I pray) may ever direct your heart. Amen.

—W. Tindalus

These words bear striking resemblance to the words of another godly man who was also sitting in a lonely prison cell. His name was Paul. He wrote to his son

Timothy urging him to bring when he comes "the cloak that he left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and especially the parchments."

We have no record that Tyndale's requests were acknowledged, and on Oct. 6th 1536, Tyndale was taken out, tied to a stake, strangled, and burned. His last words uttered just before they pulled the wire that took his life were, "Lord open the king of England's eyes."

The Lord quickly answered that prayer.

John Rogers, an assistant of Tyndale's, finished translating the OT. He put the OT with Tyndale's NT and sent it to England.

The archbishop of Canterbury got approval from the king and it was published under the name of Matthews. It was Tyndale's work— In fact on the last page of Malichai the letters W.T. appeared in type appo. 4 inches high. The Matthews Bible had strong footnotes, and fearing that they would offend the king, the Secretary of State had Miles Coverdale edit it and soften down the footnotes in 1539.

The result was the Great Bible, called that because of its huge size. Appo. page size was 15"X20". Every church in England was required to purchase a Great Bible and make it available for the people to read! Not only that, they were required to furnish a reader to read to those who could not read! Tyndale had prayed, "Lord, open the king of England's eyes" and appo. 3 years later the king was ordering the people be provided with a Bible to read which was substantially Tyndale's.

Remember Bishop Tostall? He was the man who bought Tyndale's first New Testaments so he could burn them. 3 years after Tyndale's death, Tostall approved the Great Bible for use in England, never realizing it was based on Tyndale's work!" Estimated 50,000 copies of NT by his death. Between 1525/1566 40 editions are recorded.

In 1553 Queen Mary tried to stamp out the Reformation. She listed 300 churchmen for execution. Many of them fled to Geneva, Switzerland. And there in 1560 the Geneva Version was published. It was called the Breeches Bible because of the way Gen. 3, v. 7 is translated, "And they sewed fig leaves together and made breeches." The Geneva Bible was the Bible the pilgrims brought to America. The King James Version was printed 9 years before they sailed, but they felt it was too liberal and not sound.

In 1604 King James called a conference to try to iron out some religious differences. At that conference it was suggested to him that a new translation was needed. James was very receptive.

James was no saint! It is one of the ironies of history and the providence and sovereignty of God that he used this man to lead in the translating of the Bible that bears his name. Mr. Paul Leetan has this to say about King James:

He was a habitual drunkard and rumored to be addicted to other vices which could not be mentioned in public. As king of England he married off his children like pawns to suit his foreign policy. He drained the royal treasury to meet the cost of his extravagancies in wine and women.

Unkingly in almost every respect, he was described thus by J. R. Green: "His big head, his slobbering tongue, his quilted clothes, his rickety legs, his goggle eyes, stood out as a grotesque contrast with all that men recalled of Henry and Elizabeth in his gabble, his want of personal dignity, his coarse buffoonery, his drunkenness, his pedantry, his contemptible cowardice."

Yet God in overruling providence used this man to assemble scholars and push through the Authorized Translation of the Bible in 1611—the most influential Bible of all times.

James appointed Dr. Richard Bancroft to head a selection committee consisting of 3 men from each of the major schools in England— Oxford, Cambridge and Westminster.

6 committees were formed to work on the new translation. There were approximately 47 men. Some died before it was complete and others were added. These were the greatest theological brains of their day. They worked on the translation for appo. 6 years with the king's full backing and provision. It is interesting to compare this with Tyndale, who, under the greatest hardship while fleeing the authorities, and while constantly on the run translated his New Testament in 2 years. Tyndale's work was so well-done that appo. 90% of it went word for word into the King James Bible 75 years later. The King James Bible was finished in 1610 and printed in 1611.

The new translation was not accepted by the fundamentalists of the day. It took appo. 50 years for it to become the dominant Bible of the English-speaking people. Dr. Hugh Broughton, a distinguished scholar, had this to say about the new translation:

The late Bible...was sent to me to censure. Which bred in me a sadness that will grieve me while I breathe, it is so ill done. Tell His Majesty that I had rather be rent in pieces with wild horses, than any such translation by my consent should be urged upon poor churches...The new edition crosseth me. I require it to be burnt.

The practice of grumbling about new translations is not new!

The 1611 King James Bible went through a number of major revisions. The Bible most of us use today was revised in 1769. The 1611 Bible contained the apocryphal books which are accepted by the Roman Catholic Church.

A 1629 edition was the first to drop the Apocrypha.

There have been several interesting misprints in the King James Bible's many editions.

The 1611 editions printed, "Then cometh Judas" in place of "Jesus" at Matt. 26:36.

The second edition repeated 20 words of Exodus 14:10.

The "wicked" Bible omitted the word "not" from the 7th commandment!

The "vinegar" Bible used the word vinegar instead of vineyard in the parable of the laborers.

In the late nineteenth century the American Bible Society examined 6 editions of the King James Bible then circulating and found 24,000 variations in text and punctuation, none of which marred the integrity of the text or affected any doctrine or precept of the Bible.

All that to show us that the KJ Bible we hold in our hands today isn't the same Bible that was published in 1611!

The KJ Bible had a greater impact on the English-speaking world than any other single piece of literature. Today scholars have given us a text that is closer to the original, but it is still a very good translation and has stood well the test of time.

Today in England, the places where the blood of martyrs ran on the ground, and the place where the acrid smell of burning flesh filled the air are simply marked with a plaque.

The towers and dungeons where men and women languished in sickness and loneliness are museums.

These men and women were willing to pay the price so you and I could have a Bible in our language.

Every Bible we hold in our hands today is a monument to those brave men and women. The challenge for us is not to allow the Bible to be neglected and commonplace.

Does our courage, commitment and conviction match those men and women's?
Are we willing, if called upon, to die for the faith for which they gladly gave their last full measure of devotion?

May God help us to be faithful!