

William Tyndale

"Always Singing One Note"

The Cost of Bringing the Bible to the People of England

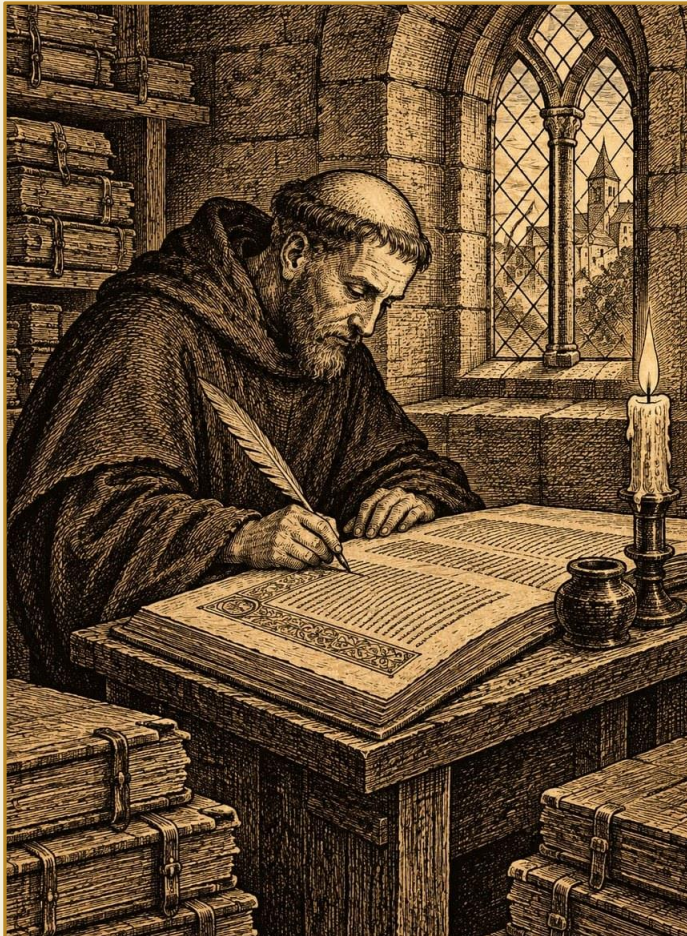
c. 1494 – 1536

"I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church."

— Colossians 1:24



The Long Road to Tyndale



1346–53

Plague sweeps Europe, and trust in the clergy is badly shaken

1351–53

Parliament trims the pope's reach into English affairs

c. 1382

Wycliffe's circle completes the first English Bible

1401

Burning becomes England's legal penalty for heresy

1409

English Scripture outlawed without a bishop's license

c. 1450

Gutenberg's press makes books cheap and fast

1516

Erasmus publishes the Greek New Testament

1517

Luther posts his Ninety-Five Theses

A Light Kindled — and Outlawed

THE SPARK

John Wycliffe, c. 1328–1384

An Oxford scholar who put Scripture above every church authority and named Christ, not the pope, as head of the church. His circle produced the first complete English Bible, translated from the Latin and copied by hand.

THE CARRIERS

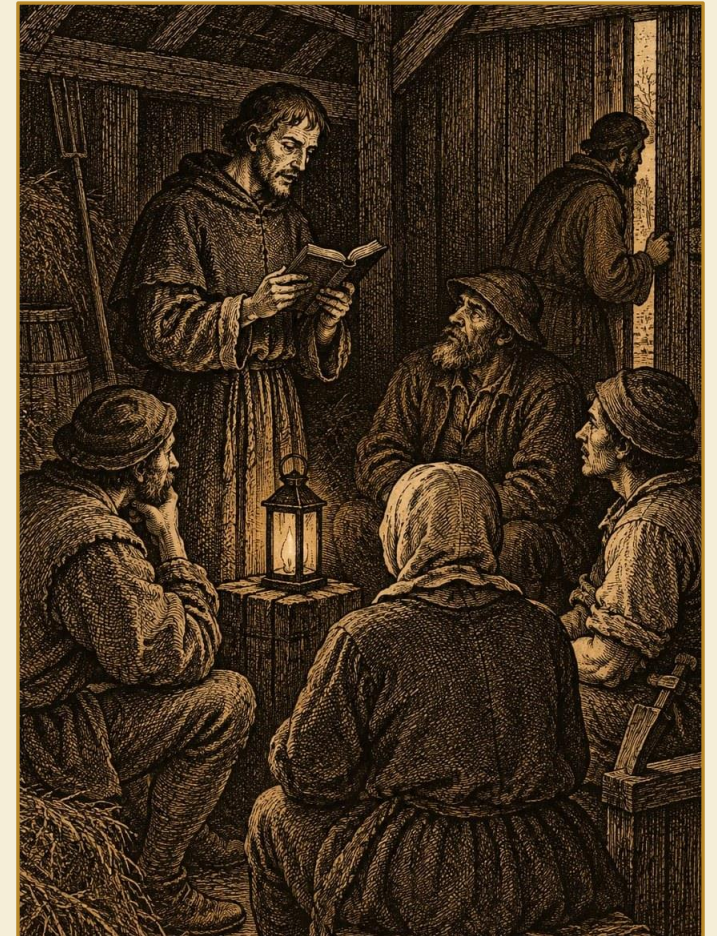
The Lollards

Weavers, merchants, and farmers who copied, memorized, and quietly preached Scripture from village to village for more than a century.

THE CRACKDOWN

1401 · 1409 · 1519

Burning made law for heresy (1401). English Scripture banned without a bishop's approval (1409). Seven burned at Coventry for teaching their children the Lord's Prayer in English (1519).



Meanwhile, Europe Wakes Up



1516

Back to the Sources

Ad fontes: scholars return to the original Greek and Hebrew. Erasmus prints the Greek New Testament, the very text Tyndale will translate.

c. 1450

Gutenberg's Press

Months of hand-copying become days of printing. Books get cheap, and ideas start to outrun the censors.

1517–1522

Martin Luther

Ninety-Five Theses (1517), no retreat at Worms (1521), and a German New Testament from hiding at the Wartburg (1522).

1519–1529

Reform Finds Shelter

Zwingli preaches through Matthew in Zurich. Independent German princes and the Ottoman threat keep Emperor Charles V distracted.

FAITH ALONE · GRACE ALONE · SCRIPTURE ALONE · CHRIST ALONE · PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

The England Tyndale Knew

THE CROWN

Henry VIII, “Defender of the Faith”

Rome’s loyal ally through the 1520s: he wrote against Luther in 1521, kept England free of any English Bible, and burned Lutheran books.

MEN IN TYNDALE’S PATH

Cardinal Wolsey

Lord Chancellor;
burned Luther’s books
at St Paul’s, 1521

Cuthbert Tunstall

Bishop of London;
refused Tyndale in
1523

Sir Thomas More

Wrote some 750,000
words against Tyndale

Thomas Cromwell

Rising adviser who
later tried to lure
Tyndale home

BUT THE WALLS LEAKED

Merchants smuggled Reformation books across the Channel in the cloth trade, the same route Tyndale’s New Testaments would later travel. Students met the new ideas at Wittenberg, Louvain, Oxford, and Cambridge.



The World Before Tyndale



Bible in Latin Only

For 1,000 years, the only authorized translation of Scripture was the Latin Vulgate. Ordinary people could not understand it — even if they had access to it.



Church as Gatekeeper

The Roman Catholic Church prohibited Bible translation into common languages. Priests alone were considered qualified to interpret Scripture — and they had every incentive to keep it that way.



Death for Reading

In England, the 1401 law de Haeretico Comburendo made heresy — including reading an English Bible — punishable by being burned alive. A boy of 11 once watched a young man burned for possessing the Lord's Prayer in English.

Who Was William Tyndale?

BORN:	c. 1494, Gloucestershire, England
EDUCATED:	Oxford (B.A. 1512, M.A. 1515) Cambridge, further theology
LANGUAGES:	Greek, Hebrew, Latin, German, French, Spanish, Italian, English — fluent in all 8
ORDAINED:	Catholic priest — but a Reformer at heart
DIED:	Oct. 6, 1536 — strangled & burned at the stake, Vilvoorde, Belgium

"I defy the Pope and all his laws.

*If God spare my life, in a few years I will make
sure that a boy who drives a plow will know
more about the Bible than you do."*

*— Tyndale to a clergyman, c. 1522
The declaration that defined his life*

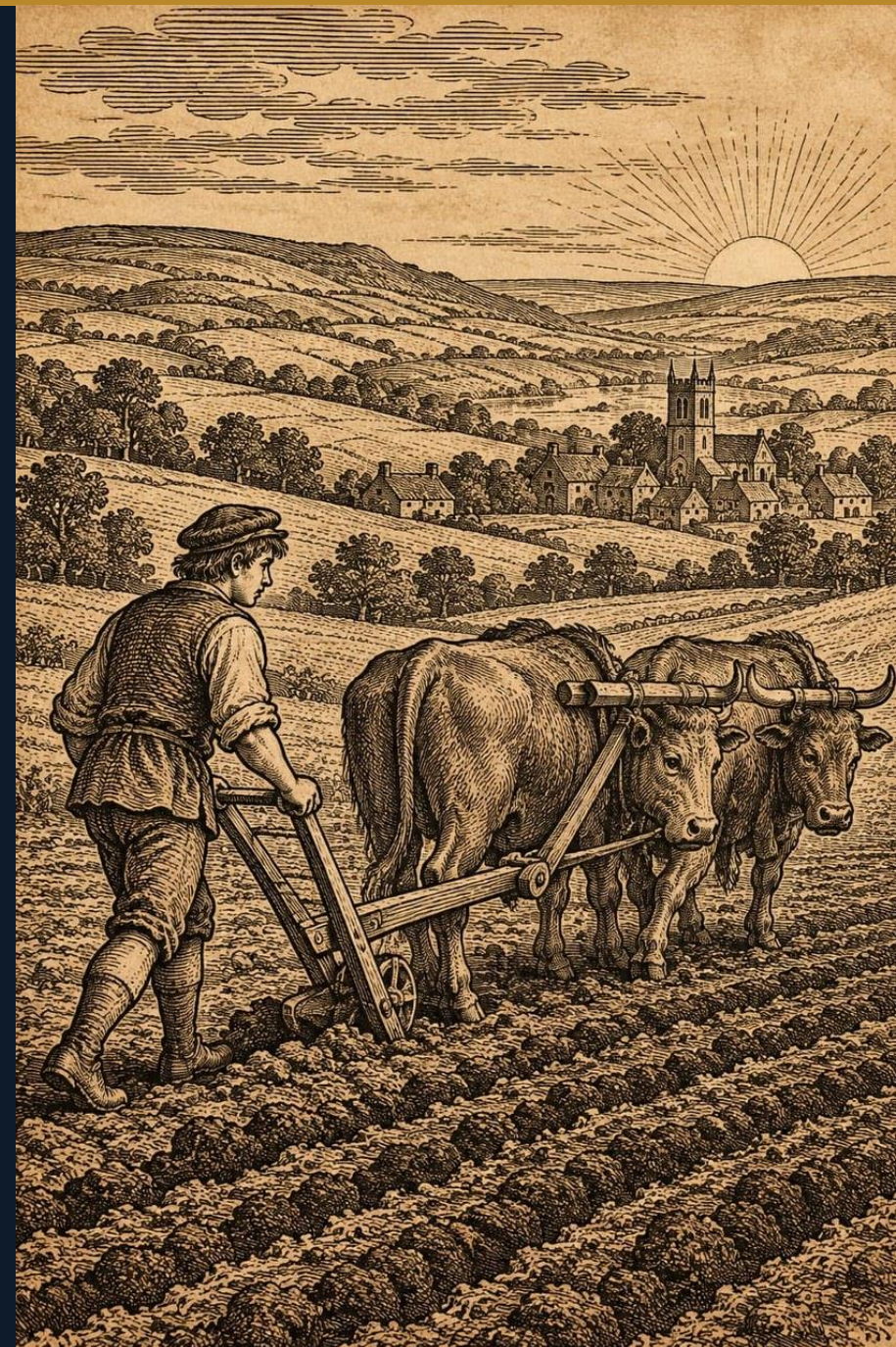
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I defy the Pope and all his laws. If God spare my life, in a few years I will make sure that a boy who drives a plow will know more about the Bible than you do.

— William Tyndale, c. 1522

To a clergyman who declared the Pope's law more important than God's

He then spent the rest of his life making good on that promise — and never returned to England.



"Whatever It Costs" — Tyndale to the King, 1531

In 1531, Stephen Vaughan — a merchant sent by the king's adviser Thomas Cromwell — found Tyndale hiding on the continent and offered him mercy if he would return to England. Tyndale was moved to tears. But then he sounded his "one note" again: "Will the king authorize a vernacular English Bible?"

"I assure you, if it would stand with the King's most gracious pleasure to grant only a bare text of the Scripture to be put forth among his people . . . I shall immediately make faithful promise never to write more . . . but immediately to repair unto his realm, and there most humbly submit myself at the feet of his royal majesty, offering my body to suffer what pain or torture, yea, what death his grace will, so this be obtained."

— William Tyndale, May 1531, via Stephen Vaughan's letter to Cromwell

The king refused. Tyndale never went home. He would spend five more years in exile, translating — and then be martyred.

12 Years in Exile — The Work of a Lifetime



In his own words: "my pains . . . my poverty . . . my exile . . . my hunger, my thirst, my cold, the great danger wherewith I am everywhere encompassed." — Tyndale, 1531

What Tyndale Gave the English Language

83%

*of the King James Version
New Testament is
Tyndale's own wording*

Words he coined:

*atonement · Passover
scapegoat · mercy seat
Jehovah · intercession*

Phrases Tyndale gave to the English language — still in use today:

- *"Let there be light"*
- *"Am I my brother's keeper?"*
- *"The salt of the earth"*
- *"The powers that be"*
- *"Fight the good fight"*
- *"The signs of the times"*
- *"The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak"*
- *"In the beginning was the Word"*
- *"Our Father, which art in heaven"*
- *"It came to pass"*

*"Newspaper headlines still quote Tyndale, though unknowingly, and he has reached more people than even Shakespeare."
— David Daniell, Tyndale biographer*

Why the Church Tried to Destroy Him

Five Translation Choices That Toppled an Institution

<i>presbuteros</i>	"priest" → "elder"
<i>ekklesia</i>	"church" → "congregation"
<i>metanoeo</i>	"do penance" → "repent"
<i>exomologeō</i>	"confess" → "acknowledge"
<i>agape</i>	"charity" → "love"

Piper: "He cannot possibly have been unaware that those words in particular undercut the entire sacramental structure of the thousand-year church."

The Deeper Reason

- If people could read Scripture themselves, they would discover that purgatory is not in the Bible.
- If people could read Scripture themselves, they would discover that mandatory confession to a priest is not in the Bible.
- If people could read Scripture themselves, they would discover that the sale of indulgences has no biblical basis.
- The Church's wealth, power, and control over the state depended on the people NOT reading Scripture.

"The church realized that they would not be able to sustain certain doctrines biblically because the people would see that they are not in the Bible." — John Piper

The Betrayal

Antwerp, May 21, 1535

Henry Phillips — a charming English gentleman in financial ruin from gambling — had spent months building Tyndale's trust in Antwerp, sharing meals and discussing theology. Tyndale lent him money.

On May 21, Phillips invited Tyndale to dinner. As John Foxe recorded:

"So Master Tyndale went before, and Philips, a tall comely person, followed behind him: who had set officers on either side of the door . . . and coming through the same entry, Philips pointed with his finger over Master Tyndale's head down to him, that the officers who sat at the door might see that it was he whom they should take."

— John Foxe, Book of Martyrs

From Prison — September 1535

"I beg your lordship . . . that if I am to remain here through the winter, you will request the commissary to have the kindness to send me a warmer cap; for I suffer greatly from cold in the head . . . a warmer coat also, for this which I have is very thin . . .

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."

*— Tyndale to a prison official, Vilvorde Castle
He was still asking for his Hebrew Bible.*

He Died. Then What?

October 6, 1536

"Lord! Open the King of England's eyes!"

*His last words before being strangled and burned
at the stake, Vilvoorde, Belgium
Age 42. Never married. Never buried.*

God's Answer to That Prayer:

1539

Henry VIII authorizes the Great Bible for all English churches — three years after Tyndale's death. Built largely on Tyndale's own translation.

1557

The Geneva Bible — "the Bible of the nation" — sells over 1 million copies. Tyndale's work is its foundation.

1611

The King James Bible is published. 47 scholars. 83% of the New Testament is Tyndale's. His killers are forgotten. His words endure.

Colossians 1:24 in Action

Tyndale's afflictions "filled up" what was lacking — the personal presentation of Christ's gospel to the English-speaking world. He carried it at the cost of his life. The blood of the martyrs became seed. "The swans are not silent." — Piper

What Drove Him?

Piper's Main Argument: Tyndale's Theology Was the Engine

⚡ Erasmus "The Lightning Bug"

- Believed in an English Bible
 - Criticized Church abuses
 - But: defended human free will
 - But: saw no great depth of sin
 - But: light irony and layered nuance
 - But: never burned anything
- or anyone

Piper: "A masterpiece of humanist piety — but something in the Enchiridion is missing . . . where Luther thunders, Erasmus makes a sweet sound."

⚡⚡ Tyndale "The Lightning Bolt"

- Humanity is in total bondage to sin
- Christ's death is the only rescue
- Justification by faith alone — non-negotiable
- The Bible MUST be in English — lives depend on it
- No irony. No ambiguity. One note.

Tyndale's own words: "By faith are we saved only in believing the promises. And though faith be never without love and good works, yet is our saving imputed neither to love nor unto good works but unto faith only."

This is what he died for: *Sola fides justificat apud Deum.*

"To walk from Erasmus into Tyndale is to move, as Mark Twain would say, from a lightning bug to a lightning bolt." — John Piper

Printed, Smuggled, Burned: The 1526 New Testament

PRINTED: 3,000–6,000 pocket-sized copies
Peter Schoeffer printed the octavo edition in Worms, Germany (historians' estimate)

SMUGGLED: Hidden in bales of cloth and barrels
and carried across the English Channel into England

BURNED: Banned by Church and government
Authorities bought up and burned almost the entire print run

3

early copies of the 1526 edition survive today
Only two are complete or nearly complete

- St Paul's Cathedral
London
- The British Library
London
- Württembergische Landesbibliothek
Stuttgart, Germany · complete copy found in 1996

The First Words English Readers Saw: John 1, 1526



WHAT YOU ARE SEEING

John 1 in the British Library copy, printed in Worms, 1526

TYNDALE'S WORDS

"In the begynnyng was that worde, and that worde was with god..."

THE PICTURE

Saint John writing, his eagle beside him

Image: British Library Board, via Wikimedia Commons (public domain)

The Work Tyndale Started Is Still Underway

7,400+

living languages
in the world today

*Every person deserves
Scripture in their heart
language*

3,400+

languages with at
least some Scripture

*New Testament, portions,
or the complete Bible*

~522

languages still
waiting to begin

*37 million people have
no Scripture access at all*

1/day

New Bible translation
project starting

*The fastest pace of
translation in history*

The Hidden Need: Oral Learners

Even where Bible translation exists, at least 50% of humans cannot read well enough to understand the Bible. 70% of the world lives in oral communities. For them, a printed Bible is not enough — they need to hear it in their heart language.

Continuing What Tyndale Started

Tyndale died so the English-speaking world could have God's Word in their own language. Today, Covenant supports mission organizations doing the same for the rest of the world. Two Covenant Mission Partners are:



In Q3 of 2026 alone, Covenant Missions provided \$45,000 to organizations for the exclusive purpose of providing Bibles in native languages. Current efforts are split between solar powered audio Bibles for those with unwritten tribal languages and written translations.

He Saw a Need. He Worked to Fill It. He Died Doing It.

"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church."

— **Colossians 1:24**

What Tyndale's afflictions lacked was not worth — Christ's afflictions have infinite worth. What was lacking was their personal presentation, in the English language, to the English-speaking world. Tyndale spent his blood filling that lack. And the gospel spread. The same need exists today. The same God calls. The same pattern holds.

