

## The History of the Reformation...Part 4

HOW GOD  
IN KINDNESS  
PROVIDED  
US AN  
ENGLISH  
BIBLE



### John Wycliffe...

### The First, Complete English Bible

It was spring, early spring...maybe March or April. It was spring in the year of our Lord 1428.

A group of men, a few of whom were dressed in clerical garb, made their way under cover of darkness toward the chapel at St. Mary's Church in Lutterworth.

They carried but a single torch and moved quietly and stuck to the shadow of the tree line as they walked. It would have been impossible to make out their faces in the darkness, but if a person could have they would have noted their expressions as sullen and angry. They had every right to be that way. They had been sent on a grisly mission. They were not afraid of the townspeople. They were not afraid of them because they carried the full authority of the both the papacy and the English crown behind them. Still, they knew how the citizens of Lutterworth were going to react to what they were about to do. There was no reason to make their task any harder than it had to be. So they stuck to the shadows. Had it not been for their

single torch and the steamy plumes made by their exhaling into crisp night air they could have just as easily been ghosts in the mist. But they were they were not ghosts. They were men, real men, malevolent and cruel.

They were led by a man named Richard Fleming. He was the head of the parish, the powerful Bishop of Lincoln. Fleming was there, of course, because Lutterworth and St. Mary's Church lay under his charge. He was there not because he especially wanted to be there. He was there, rather, because he had been ordered there by the Pope. Accompanying Fleming and the other church officials in the procession was the grim-faced Sheriff of Leicestershire (less ter sheer). Fleming represented the authority of the church. The sheriff represented the authority of the state.

Had it been daylight outside, the men and women of Lutterworth might have wondered whether these men had come to pray, or to conduct a mass, or to ordain some new rector or priest to service at St. Mary's. They might have wondered that had they not already known...known about the conflict that had lain moldering now some forty years, and had the men in the procession not been carrying pickaxes and shovels.

No, the men in procession were not there to ordain anyone, or to worship, or even to pray. They were there to dig up a dead body...to exhume a corpse...and not just any corpse.

They were there to dig up John Wycliffe, the enigmatic force behind the Wycliffe Bible. They were there to dig him up even though he had been dead now some 44

years. They were there to dig him up, to defrock him, and to execute his just sentence as a heretic.

They were there to burn him at the stake.

Now the historical accounts are somewhat confusing at this point in our story. They differ as to whether Wycliffe was buried inside the church or in the churchyard. Some reports say he was buried under the flagstones of the chancel inside the church. I think that feels right. Still, it is a subjective feeling on my part. Other accounts say Wycliffe was buried in the churchyard just outside the chapel.

What is certain is that the men in the group knew where Wycliffe was buried and uncovered his grave and removed his dead body...his bones...from the consecrated ground where his body had lay at rest some forty-four years.<sup>1</sup>

Here's how author Brian Moynihan tells the story:

His remains were borne in solemn procession, under the dripping yews in the churchyard, along the streets of the town and down the wooded hillside to a field next to the humpback bridge that crossed the River Swift. This was field of execution. Public hangings continued here into coaching days, when Lutterworth was an important staging post on the route north from London past Leicester (Lester). The dead rector, however, was thought too evil to hang. A stake had been set up in the ground and piled with timber and kindling. Iron chains were attached to it at shoulder height. He was to be burnt.

Tradition allowed for the body to be dressed in the vestments that the rector had worn to celebrate mass, so that these could be stripped from him, chasuble and stole, one by one, to signify that he was "unfrocked" and deposed from the priesthood. We do not know if this ritual was observed, or whether Wycliffe's

skull was scraped, to represent the removal of oil with which he had been anointed at his ordination. Certainly, the bishops solemnly cursed him and commended his soul to the devil.

The executioner attached the dead man to the stake with the iron chains before setting fire to the kindling. He made sure the bones and skull were burned to ash in the fire, breaking them into small pieces with a mattock to help the process, until they merged into an indistinguishable grey pile of ash and embers. These were carefully scraped into a barrow. When the last particles of dust were swept clean from the scorched earth, the barrow was tipped into the waters of the River Swift.<sup>2</sup>

Historian David Schaff adds this to the story.

The words of Fuller, describing the execution of the decree of Constance, have engraven themselves on the page of English history. **“They burnt his bones to ashes and cast them into Swift, a neighboring brook running hard by. Thus this brook conveyed his ashes into Avon, Avon into Severn, Severn into the narrow seas, they into the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wycliffe are the emblem of his doctrine, which now is dispersed the world over.”**<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult for us in the twenty-first century to imagine anyone hating someone else to the degree that would be willing to dig up them up in order to burn their cold, dead body. We as moderns tend to reserve that sort of hate exclusively for the living. But Wycliffe was different. Wycliffe always had a knack for bringing that sort of emotion out in the people. If a person loved Wycliffe, they kept on loving him after he died. If a person hated Wycliffe, they kept on hating after he died.

People were never neutral regarding Wycliffe.

I want to begin a short four-week study this morning on how we came to possess an English Bible. In our study, we want to focus on the two main individuals that

God in his providence chose to use to help make an English Bible a reality. Those two men are John Wycliffe and William Tyndale.

I want to explain or try to explain why they thought it necessary that English speaking people have a Bible in their own tongue...in the vernacular. I also want to also try to explain what producing a Bible in the vernacular cost them personally. I don't want to do that simply to make you like Wycliffe and Tyndale. If you come away from our study solely as hero-worshippers I will have failed my purpose.

Both Wycliffe and Tyndale are worthy of your admiration. I think that is especially true of Tyndale.

In my own mind, Tyndale has moved up a notch from a place of profound respect to a place of deep, heartfelt affection. I view him now in almost every way as a co-equal with Luther and Calvin. Those of you that know how much I love Luther and Calvin know that I can hardly offer higher praise.

Still, if the only thing that happens as a result of our time together is that you come to love Wycliffe and Tyndale...I will have failed my purpose.

I don't want you to simply love Wycliffe and Tyndale.

I want you to love your English Bible.

I want you to love the Lord Jesus for gifting his church with men of such extraordinary metal...that they willing to suffer unspeakable things...even to

suffer the horror of being burned alive...to provide us a Bible we could read in our own tongue. And then I want your love for the Lord Jesus to manifest itself in a kind of gratitude that will cause you to actually commit to read and study your English Bible faithfully...and not just this upcoming New Year...but all the days of your life.

John Wycliffe was born in one of the villages of Yorkshire in 1330 A.D.<sup>4</sup> Little is known of his early life except that his parents owned land and were wealthy enough to give him an excellent education. Still, we know almost nothing of his life until the time he entered Oxford University in 1345.

In 1361, he was listed as the Master of Balliol Hall, one of the colleges at Oxford, which meant that he had by that time already obtained his master's degree.

In 1363, he was appointed to a benefice in Lincolnshire, which meant that he received a small salary from the church there and was responsible for hiring a parish priest to care for the souls of the people. He paid the priest a small income from his benefice and lived off what was left over. Still, he was himself a secular priest and interacted with the public through preaching and ministry as opposed to being a monk and being confined to a monastery.

In 1366, he was appointed as one of the king's chaplains.

Wycliffe finally received his doctorate in 1372 which opened up for him a whole range of possibilities. It allowed him to then both lecture and write on theological topics.<sup>5</sup> By my reckoning he would have been about forty-two years old.

Now I need to stop Wycliffe's story for just a moment and give some background for everything else I need to say this morning.

To understand Wycliffe's impact and importance you also need to understand the times in which he lived and how God providentially arranged those times to allow Wycliffe to actually complete a translation of the Bible into English.

The first thing you should know is that during Wycliffe's time Western Europe in general and England in particular experienced the ravages of the Black Death.

Starting in 1348, Europe was besieged by bouts of bubonic plague. It very nearly destroyed civilization. Some estimate that one-third to two-thirds of Western Europe died.

Life in England was almost totally disrupted.

One of the reasons that it took Wycliffe so long to get his doctorate (he would have been about forty-two at the time) was because during the more serious outbreaks of plague Oxford was unable to carry on as usual. It was simply too dangerous for students and faculty to assemble together.

Farms were simply abandoned. Fields went unplowed. Harvest often went unharvested. Farm animals wandered the countryside untended and that lack of care extended even to parish churches. Many congregations were left largely on their own. Practically that meant that many parishes had no pastors at all. One of the bishops of the time encouraged his parish priests to try to preach at least four times a year in their parishes.

You can see the expectation was not very high. As a result, many of the professors at Oxford and elsewhere were assigned the religious care of various parishes throughout the midlands near Oxford. That does not mean they were pastors in the modern sense of living near a particular church. It means they received salaries and hired other men to pastor in their absence.

Wycliffe received the livings of one parish and then another until in 1374 he was given the parish at Lutterworth, which he retained till his death in 1384.

His salary was set at £ 26 a year.

Now you shouldn't be too surprised about the fact that Wycliffe was both a professor at Oxford and a parish priest. It was common in his day partly because it provided professors the opportunity to make additional income and partly because the England of his day was still reeling from the dreadful effects of the Black Death. Still many churches went unshepherded and the care of souls was left largely to traveling mendicant friars (begging secular-monks).

I'll talk more about them in a moment.

Secondly, you need to know that the papacy was in disarray during the latter part of Wycliffe's life.

Here's why. Around 1309, the Pope Clement V moved his residence from Rome to Avignon, France. There are a number of reasons why he did so but the thing that matters for our discussion is that the papacy eventually relocated to France and more importantly became submissive to the demands of the King of France. That

meant that the English kings felt less compelled to follow the dictates of the papacy especially when it came to sending their hard earned tax dollars to the Pope in France. They viewed the Pope as not much more than a puppet manipulated by the French King.

Near the end of Wycliffe's life, the conflict in the Catholic Church turned into outright schism. At one point, there were two popes...one French and one Italian...one in Avignon and one in Rome. The church tried to remedy the problem but wound up making thing even worse...the result was that near the end of the conflict there were actually three popes...one in Avgnon, one in Rome, and one in Pisa. You can understand how that would have diminished the power of the papacy.

Thirdly and finally, you need to know that during Wycliffe's life France and England were engaged in almost conflict. Historians call that conflict the 100 Years War.

Now I want you to put those three things together and see God's providential hand moving in the background.

First of all had it not been for the plague, Wycliffe might very well have contented himself with living the life of a scholar at Oxford. The difficulties of the times more or less compelled him, not necessarily against his will, out into parish life. Wycliffe came to understand because of the benefices he held something of the importance of pastoral ministry and preaching.

Secondly, the papacy's association with France led the King of England to seek men like Wycliffe who were willing to write publicly about despicable, money-grubbing tendency of the papacy. Of course, Wycliffe did not limit his criticisms of the papacy to its desire to acquire wealth. He also criticized its other practices and even its theology.

Finally, the weakening of the papacy and the continued conflict between England and France meant that English authorities were slow, ever so slow to give it citizens over to the judgments of the church.

Without those three intertwined providences, Wycliffe would not have lasted a year much less a decade.

Now let me return to the mendicant friars.

In Wycliffe's day, England was besieged by hordes of mendicant friars. Now a friar is not exactly the same thing as a monk. Monks were generally restricted to monasteries. Friars were like monks...but were secular in that they went out among the people. The term "**mendicant**" meant they begged for their bread. There were of course many monks at Oxford.

Wycliffe despised the monks of his day.

He accused them of laziness and gluttony and corruption. Wycliffe was always an advocate of the state taxing the wealth of the monasteries. He believed that the monasteries were bleeding the nation dry. They possessed up to perhaps a third

of the land and as much as half of its wealth. Monks lived very well in Wycliffe's day as he noted in his studies at Oxford and he despised them.<sup>6</sup>

He did not feel quite the same way about the mendicant friars at least not at first. The term "**mendicant**" means they made their living or earned their bread by begging. In addition, they often performed religious rites such as hearing confession or granting absolution. Now most of the friars in Wycliffe's days were Franciscan. That is, they were members of the Order of the Franciscans founded by Francis of Assisi. They were everywhere in England in Wycliffe's day and they posed a special problem to individual parishes in that they wound up scouring the parishes of their revenue. In other words, after the mendicant monks passed through a parish there was not enough money left to sustain the regular ministry of a parish priest. They came through, heard confessions, offered absolution, took the money and left. No you might be thinking to yourself, "**Well what is wrong with that? They preached. They listened to confessions. They did the work of the ministry. Why shouldn't they get the money?**"

Here's the problem. The mendicant friars were constantly on the move. They had no tie to the community they passed through. They were never held responsible for what they said or did. They were very content to absolve a man of his sins and to give them a paper of absolution if the money was right and it was that aspect that enraged Wycliffe. You see Wycliffe understood first hand that a local priest hoping to hold sinners accountable for the manner in which they repented of their sins had no chance at all against such a shameless bunch of mercenaries. So Wycliffe came to hate the mendicants. He hated them because on the one hand they made much ado about their vows of poverty while on the other hand they shamelessly extorted money and deluded the weak and uneducated.

And it is easy to see how that happened. The people revered the mendicants. They held them in awe for their ability to absolve sins and because they believed they were true to their vows of poverty. One historian writes this:

Many made it an essential part of their last wills that their bodies, after death, should be wrapped in old, ragged Dominican or Franciscan habits, and buried among the Mendicants; for such was the barbarous superstition and wretched ignorance of this age, that people universally believed they should readily obtain mercy from Christ at the day of judgment if they appeared before his tribunal associated with the Mendicant friars.<sup>7</sup>

Now think about that. Many citizens believed that they were going to stand in better stead with God after death because they wrapped in the tattered rags of a mendicant friar. Wycliffe despised that kind of superstition and he went after them with all his being. Now I have to tell you, Wycliffe's objections early on were not theological. They were moral. He hated the dishonesty and greed and avarice of the monks and friars. He hated them violently. Early on he had admired their poverty. But when he saw how things actually worked themselves out he fought them with all his being. That meant that wrote against them in the form of various tracts and sermons. He preached against them.

Let me just share one example to help you see how Wycliffe felt about the mendicants. About 1376 or so, Wycliffe became very ill. Everyone was sure he was going to die. Some of the mendicant monks heard he was dying and came to visit him. At his bedside they appealed to him saying, **"Now brother John, you've written some terrible things about us and about to die almost certainly as a judgment from God. Shouldn't you take this opportunity and repent of what you have said and written. Shouldn't you do that... shouldn't you repent of your sin before you die?"**

Wycliffe propped himself up on his pillows and pointed his long skinny finger at them and said something to the effect of, **“Well now...because you have done this I am not going to die. In fact, I am going to come after you all the harder.”**

And in truth, that is what he did. He got up off his death bed and lived another eight years and went after them with all of his might. That is the kind of man he was.

Wycliffe’s fight with the mendicants put Wycliffe on the radar screen of the English King Edward the III. Wycliffe’s writing drew the kings’ attention and the reason it did that, I think, is because Wycliffe was willing to attack the Catholic Church over the issue of money. The king liked that.

The reason Wycliffe’s writings against the mendicant monks drew Wycliffe to the King’s attention is because the pope, Pope Gregory XI, the last pope before the Great Schism, was demanding from England an enormous ecclesiastical contribution to the papacy. Needless to say, the government was unable to pay the tax both because they were unable to tax the property set aside in the monasteries and because the begging friars were scouring the parishes clean.

Parliament then backed king’s refusal to pay the tax and a commission was appointed by Parliament to negotiate with the papacy. Wycliffe was appointed as a member of that commission. After the return of the commission, Wycliffe began to write against the papacy with an increased fervor.

He wrote that the civil magistrate was not under the dominion of the church.

He wrote that the pope had no permanent dominion over anything and that its decrees only mattered as they were in conformity with the law of God.

He wrote that the pope had no authority to excommunicate anyone who had not already excommunicated themselves by their own sinfulness.

He wrote that ultimately the only authority that mattered...was the authority of the Word of God.

Now needless to say, that angered the pope who insisted that the king submit Wycliffe to be examined by the archbishop of Canterbury or the Bishop of London to determine whether or not he was orthodox or a heretic.

That cause was taken up by the Bishop of London, William Courtenay, who summoned Wycliffe to St. Paul's in London. Wycliffe arrived at St. Paul's in the company of the King's son, John of Gaunt...the Earl of Lancaster and four Dominican mendicant friars who were planning to represent him. But the examination never took place. The Bishop of London and John of Gaunt got into a fight over whether Wycliffe had to stand or was to be permitted to be seated during his examination. John of Gaunt, the four Dominicans and John Wycliffe had to fight their way with swords out of St. Paul's. Needless to say the church never forgave Wycliffe.

Shortly after the riot at St. Paul's Gregory XI, the last pope before the Great Schism, issued five decrees or bulls against Wycliffe and insisted that he be shipped off to France for trial. John of Gaunt, Edward the III's son and the Protector of young Richard II refused and simply placed Wycliffe under house arrest at Oxford.

Wycliffe then began to write against the doctrine of transubstantiation.

When Wycliffe did that he argued that that the benefit of receiving Christ only occurred as the elements were received in faith. He did not deny that Christ was present in the supper. What he denied was that priests had any ability in and of themselves to consecrate the elements to turn them into the body and blood of Jesus. He denied that the elements ever stopped being bread and wine.

Now the implication of his argument was pretty dramatic. It meant, when logically followed out to its conclusion, that salvation then was no longer in the hands of priests. It meant that each man might come to God on the basis of faith and not on the basis of receiving the body and blood of Jesus in the sacrament. It meant that man's relationship to God was mediated by Jesus and not by some priest or by the church.

This idea was his most radical idea and yet today we see it and accept it as something rather obvious.

It cost Wycliffe his post at Oxford. In 1381, he was banned from the university. He retired to his parish at Lutterworth. Even John of Gaunt, his able defender at St. Paul's, abandoned him. I think Wycliffe might have been turned over to the papacy at that point had providence not intervened. Two things happened. The schism occurred in the Catholic church at exactly that moment and the church wound up with two popes...you already know all about that, and Wycliffe had a stroke. Officials were certain Wycliffe was about to die so they decided to simply leave him alone and let him fade away. But, of course, Wycliffe did not die. He recovered.

Now had Wycliffe been an ordinary man he would have simply retired to his study at Lutterworth and lived out his life and died and been buried and been forgotten. But he was not an ordinary man. Wycliffe simply could not get the idea of the “**mendicant friars**” out of his mind. Though he loathed their actions and greed, he could not get out of his mind the wonderful potential of sending preachers out to the parishes decimated by the plague. I think perhaps he inspired by the thought of Jesus sending out his disciples two by two to preach the gospel.

All they needed was an English Bible to preach.

So Wycliffe began to translate the Bible into English. We don't know just how much of the Wycliffe Bible he himself translated, and it really doesn't matter. He and the men loyal to him began to translate the Latin Vulgate into the language of the people of middle England.

The first complete Wycliffe Bible was finished in 1382. They were copied by hand.

But Wycliffe didn't stop by simply translating the Bible. He then recruited young men from Oxford to voluntarily submit to a life of poverty and to take the Bible he and his colleagues had translated out to the parishes and preach to the poorer people.

These men, clothed in simple garments...often barefoot...they called themselves the “**poor priests.**” Later on these educated men were joined by even simpler men. They preached wherever they could and they actually preached the Bible. Imagine a poor uneducated farmer in England hearing the Word of God in English for the very first time. Sometimes they simply read passages and gave the sense of the

words in the common language of the people. Sometimes they led worship and sang psalms and preached. The people all over England loved them as they had loved the mendicants before them...and in loving them they came to know and love the Lord Jesus through their preaching.

These “poor priests” were sometimes called “Lollards”. The title was probably first spoken as an insult...it may have meant something like “mumblers.”

In time, the “Lollards” came to be associated permanently with Wycliffe and anyone opposing the Roman church. But that was still thirty or forty years off.

Eventually, the Lollards would be burned alive by the scores and Wycliffe himself would be burned too. Next week we’ll talk more about why the church was so anxious to stop the spread of a vernacular Bible, and how God in his providence wove together a number of extraordinary events to make a vernacular Bible possible.

Let’s pray.

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<sup>1</sup> John Charles Carrick, *Wycliffe and the Lollards* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Son, 1908), 225. “Wycliffe died peacefully in 1384 and was buried in the chancel of Lutterworth Church. In 1415 the Council of Constance passed a decree condemning forty five articles of Wycliffism and ordered that as an obstinate heretic his bones should be dug up, burned, and thrown upon a dunghill; much in the same manner as the Portuguese sailors castigate the effigy of Judas Iscariot on Good Friday, or as a little child beats the chair or table which has given it hurt and annoyance. Year after year passed, and this childish decree was never carried out. In 1428, however, acting evidently on local knowledge, the Pope Clement VIII., gave orders that this decree should be executed probably as a warning to England and Bohemia, which had also through royal relationship become impregnated with Lollard ideas. Fleming was then Bishop of Lincoln and at Lutterworth his officers saw Wycliffe’s ashes unearthed and thrown into the Swift close by, and thence carried according to the almost proverbial expression, into the river and the sea and the ocean, and so round the world—like Wycliffe’s doctrines.” C.f. Gotthard Victor Lechler, *John Wycliffe and His English Precursors*, (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1904), 502.” Very early in the sessions of the assembly the

doctrines of Wycliffe were taken into consideration. The forty five Articles were condemned as heresies. Two hundred and sixty more had been industriously gathered from his writings but the council seems not to have had patience to hear them all. On May 4 1415 at the eighth full session of the council the English Reformer himself was solemnly declared the leader of heresy in that age. His books were ordered to be burned and his remains to be disinterred from their grave at Lutterworth and removed from consecrated ground if they can be distinguished from the bones of the faithful. The reason of this proceeding was of course that he had died in excommunication!"

<sup>2</sup> Brian Moynihan, *God's Bestseller* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 2002), ix-x.

<sup>3</sup> David S. Schaaf, *History of the Christian Church Vol. 4: The Middle Ages A.D. 1294-1517* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1910), 325.

<sup>4</sup> Donald L. Roberts, "John Wycliffe and the Dawn of the Reformation" at *Christian History Institute* <https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/Magazine/Article/John-Wycliffe-and-the-Dawn-of-the-Reformation/>

<sup>5</sup> "Wycliffe and Scholasticism," *Cambridge History of English and American Literature in 18 Volumes, Volume 2: The End of the Middle Ages, 1907-21.*

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, *Vol. 30: Luther's Works, vol. 30 : The Catholic Epistles*, Trans. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed. In *Luther's Works 1 Jn 4:11.* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House , 1999, c1967). "This, I fear, will happen to our monks, even to those who appear to be the saintliest. For we see that their sects are only sects of perdition, because they want to propitiate God by means of their vows and their sanctity. The works of Christ and Christ Himself are superior by far to our works, in which we have lived at least 40 years and have accomplished nothing. John wants this one and only article, namely, that God sent His only-begotten Son into the world and that we live through Christ alone, committed to us. This article Satan tries to take away from us. In this article the monks have erred; and if they have not repented, they have been damned, as Wycliffe has said. **I am surprised that he saw this in his time.**"

<sup>7</sup> James Strong & John McClintock, "Mendicant Order" in the *Cyclopedia Of Biblical, Theological And Ecclesiastical Literature.*