

The History of the Reformation...Part 4

HOW GOD
IN KINDNESS
PROVIDED
US AN
ENGLISH
BIBLE



William Tyndale... Beyond the Fray...Martyrdom

William Tyndale was arrested May 21, 1535 in Antwerp.

He was imprisoned, Catholic officials would have called it secured, some thirty miles away in the depths of the dreaded Vilvoorde Castle which was located just six miles north of Brussels. The castle no longer exists but was built on the model of the infamous Bastille Prison in Paris.

Tyndale languished in the dark dungeons there for 450 days during which time he was kept almost completely isolated. He was almost completely isolated except when he was being repeatedly examined by Catholic theologians regarding his views on theology, the Scripture, and the Reformation in general.

In August 1536, Tyndale was formally degraded from the priesthood and relaxed into the hands of secular authorities. To be relaxed did not, of course, mean the same thing back then it does today. Back then it was a technical term which meant

a person was being released to the secular powers in order to be executed. It allowed the Catholic Church to argue that it never actually shed blood itself. It was a little like Pilate washing his hands of the blood of the Lord Jesus. It was, for all practical purposes, simply for show.

On October 6, 1536 Tyndale was led up and out into the courtyard at Vilvoorde and fastened to an upright stake. He had a chain wrapped around his chest and around his lower legs, and a rope loop passing through a hole in stake was placed around his neck. He was then publically condemned to both the flames and to everlasting perdition.

After the charges were read against him, he was then summarily strangled and burned at the stake. The reason he was strangled first was because he had at onetime been a Catholic priest. The act of strangling a man before he was burned at the stake was considered to be a kindness. This kindness was extended to Tyndale because Catholic officials reasoned he had at one time at least faithfully served the church.

A few reports claim that Tyndale was not quite dead when they lit the wooden faggots piled about him; those reports claim Tyndale woke up in the midst of being burned alive. There is really no way to know whether those reports are true or not.

We do know, however, the last thing Tyndale ever said. The last thing he said before he was strangled was, **“Lord, open the king of England’s eyes.”**¹

His ashes were gathered up and dumped into the nearby River Zenne.²

Tyndale died having been in prison at Vilvoorde one year, four months, and sixteen days.

Those are the bare facts...the bare facts of Tyndale's martyrdom.

But there is an extraordinary story leading up to that moment. Here's the rest of the story.

By 1534, Tyndale had more or less settled into his life at Antwerp. He was living at a place called the English House which was run by a fellow Englishman named Thomas Poyntz. The English House became Tyndale's new home. It was the first place he had ever stayed for more than a month or two in succession since the year he lived with Humphrey Monmouth back in London in 1523.³

The English House was a house given to English merchants by the Belgian government to encourage trade with England. When English businessmen came to Antwerp on business trips, they could stay at the English House. Residing in the English House granted an Englishmen certain privileges. It wasn't quite the same as staying at an embassy, but it definitely provided more protection than lodging in a boarding house or a hostel. It was privilege for an Englishman to stay at the English House and it was quite possible for an Englishmen to lose the privilege of staying at the English House especially if they got into trouble with Belgian government.

There is no way to know exactly how Tyndale came to stay there but I think it happened because the manager of the house, Thomas Poyntz, was related to Lady

Walsh back in Little Sodbury. That was where he had tutored the two young boys after graduating from Oxford.

Poyntz, the manager of the English House, developed a deep affection for Tyndale and was quite concerned both to see that Tyndale had time to work and that Tyndale remained safe and free.

The English House was perfect for Tyndale.

We even know a little about Tyndale's routine while boarding at the English House because of details passed on, probably by Poyntz, to historian John Foxe.⁴

Author Brian Moynihan sums up Foxe's account by saying that Tyndale was very thin, very small of frame, and very frugal with his money. He spent most days working non-stop on his translation of the Bible. But on Mondays, Tyndale would stop working and leave the English House to go out and comfort other English families living in and around Antwerp. He did that both by giving them spiritual encouragement and by giving them money.

On Saturdays, Tyndale would take what little money he had left and walk about the streets of Antwerp looking in every "corner and hole" for the old, and the weak, and families overburdened with too many children. He would relieve their suffering by praying for them and by giving them money.⁵

On Sunday's, he would go to one of the rooms at the English House and read Scripture to those gathered there. He also made his custom to read Scripture out loud to those who wanted to listen for an hour every night after dinner.

The rest of the time Tyndale was about his book...his translation of the Bible.

And by 1534, he was making extraordinary progress.

He had already completed his translation of the New Testament. In fact, he had completed it back as early as 1525 some eight years before. By 1534, however, Tyndale had thoroughly revised his initial translation correcting errors and smoothing it out in a number of places.

He writes in the preface of his 1534 edition:

“Here thou hast (most dear reader) the New Testament or covenant made with us of God in Christ’s blood...which I have looked over again (now at the last) with all diligence, and compare it unto the Greek, and have weeded out of it many faults, which lack of help at the beginning, and *my own* oversight, did sow within.”⁶

But the translation of the New Testament wasn’t the only thing Tyndale had completed by 1534. By 1534, Tyndale had accomplished much, much more than that.

He had written three very important books, the *Wicked Mammon*, the *Practice of the Prelates*, and the *Obedience of the Christian Man*. All the books were important but I think the *Obedience of the Christian Man* would by itself have secured Tyndale’s place in Reformation history.

He had also written a very important public response to Thomas More’s work book against both him and Luther, and he had written quite a number of letters

encouraging and strengthening other Protestants suffering persecution. And as if that wasn't quite enough, he had also completed and printed an English translation of the *Pentateuch*. He had completed that some four years earlier in 1530.

Still, Tyndale wasn't finished.

By 1534, Tyndale and was making tremendous progress on his translation of the rest of the *Old Testament*. By the time Tyndale was betrayed and captured in 1535, he had managed to make his way nearly to the end of *2nd Chronicles*.

Let me just give one example of Tyndale's style in translating the *Old Testament*. This is from David Daniell's biography of Tyndale and concerns Tyndale's translation of 1 Samuel 13.

One final example: in 2 Samuel 13, Tyndale has Amnon, crafty-sick and disastrously lustful for his half sister Tamar say to King David who has come to visit him, "Let Tamar my sister come and make me a couple of fritters in my sight, that I may eat of her hand." What could be more harmlessly brotherly than that spoken "couple of fritters?" What Tamar will actually prepare is a mystery, however, because the Hebrew word Tyndale translated "fritter" is only used one time in the Bible. The KJV turns whatever it was Amnon wanted Tamar to make into something a little more formal calling it "a couple of cakes" which Daniell says completely misses says the pretended casualness of Amnon, who is frittering his need. "According to Daniell, "a couple of fritters" is something someone might actually say where a "couple of cakes" is not.⁷

You can see Tyndale worked hard to make his translation understandable. He was gifted in that regard and he was a tireless worker. I think the timing of Tyndale's arrest is particularly tragic. Once he finished *Chronicles*, he intended to start on *Job*,

Psalms, and *Proverbs*. Just imagine how wonderful a translation of the *Psalms* might have been.

But it was not to be.

Still in 1534, Tyndale enjoyed a reasonably secure living in the English House in Antwerp. English merchants were paying him a stipend which means they were paying him for the books they sold. He was for the first time in over ten years reasonably comfortable. It is true he gave most of his money away to others, but he could do that because he had a fairly regular income.

Altogether, Tyndale's prospects were looking up in 1534.

Even the political climate back home in England seemed to be changing. Thomas Cranmer had become the Archbishop of Canterbury. Queen Anne Boleyn was sympathetic to the Reformation. Even Henry the VIII seemed to be slowly coming around to the idea of a Bible in English. It wasn't safe for Tyndale to go back home yet, of course, but the idea that he might one day be able to return to England seemed like an actual possibility.

Still, Tyndale was smart enough to be careful. Even though he was in the English House in Antwerp and a long way from the reach of Thomas More or John Stokesly, things were still dangerous. Even though Henry the VIII was warming up to the idea of English Bible things there were still spies, still men who wanted to see him dead.

Just three years before, the Cambridge scholar Thomas Bilney had been rearrested for preaching the gospel and for giving out English Bibles. Bilney was burned at the stake August 19, 1531.

Richard Bayfield was burned December 4, 1531 for smuggling Tyndale Bibles and other Christian literature into the country.

Three weeks after Bayfield, John Tewkesbury was also burned alive for possessing two of Tyndale's books *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, and *The Wicked Mammon*.

Thomas Dugate was burned in January 1532 for putting up posters which expressed his disagreement with a number of Catholic doctrines.

John Bent, a tailor, was burned in the spring of 1532 because he denied that the sacramental bread was the actual, literal body of Christ.

That same spring, a farmer named Thomas Harding was burned for simply reading Tyndale's *The Obedience of the Christian Man*.

John Bainham was arrested in December 1531. He was imprisoned for a year and then abjured in February 1532. Later, he was rearrested after he recanted his recantation. He was imprisoned at Thomas More's house. There he was tied to a tree in More's garden called the "Tree of Troth" and beaten with whips. Later he was taken to the Tower and racked until he was lame. He was then mercifully, finally burned at the stake April 30, 1532. His crime was that he denied marriage was a sacrament and he admitted to having read *Tyndale's Bible*.

John Frith, Tyndale's good friend and onetime helper, was imprisoned at Newgate Prison with his neck bound to a post by an iron collar. Later, he was condemned both for his own writings and for denying the doctrines of purgatory and transubstantiation. Still, I think Frith was particularly singled out to be burned because he known to be Tyndale' friend. He was burned at the stake at Smithfield on July 4, 1533.

Tyndale wrote Frith a very moving letter during Frith's eight month confinement in the Tower of London. In his letter, Tyndale encouraged him, **"Let not you body faint. If the pain be above your strength remember: 'Whatsoever you ask in my name, I will give it you.' And pray to the Father that he will ease your pain or shorten it...Amen."**⁸

Frith must have taken Tyndale's advice to heart because even though the wind blew the flames away from Frith while he was being burned and wound up prolonging the length of time it took him to die Frith never cried or showed any sign of pain...not even once.

A young tailor's apprentice, named Andrew Hewett, was burned along with Frith that same day. As the two men were being burned, the rector addressed the crowd watching to specifically not pray for the two men being burned...to not pray for them anymore than they would two dogs. Frith smiled at him and then prayed and asked God to forgive the rector for his hateful words.

Still, all those burning had occurred in England and William Tyndale was a long way from England. He was under the care and protection and watchful eye of Thomas Poyntz. He had completed his New Testament and was well on his way

toward completing a translation of the Old Testament. And then William Tyndale made a fateful mistake. He trusted someone he didn't really know.

The man he trusted was named Henry Phillips.

Phillips was from a good family. His father was a wealthy landowner and had served on three separate occasions as a member of Parliament and twice as sheriff.⁹ He was important enough that he was actually invited to the wedding celebration for Queen Ann Boleyn in 1533.

Henry, however, was not nearly as noble as his father.

Sometime after between leaving Oxford in 1533 and betraying Tyndale in 1535, Henry fell into complete disgrace. His father had entrusted him to deliver a rather large sum of money to another man in London.¹⁰ But Henry chose not to deliver the money. Instead, he stole the money and gambled it away. His act completely alienated him from his family and Henry found himself in the terrible predicament of being unable to go home and yet having no place else to go. He wrote his father and mother, his two brothers, and his two brother-in-laws pleading with them all to take him in. But no one would help until he made right the money he had stolen.

Phillips began to drift from place to place sponging off whomever he could simply to survive.

He could have worked. He was certainly clever enough. He was, after all, an Oxford man.

Phillips wound up on the continent completely broke, bitter against his family , against the Lutherans, and even against king, Henry VIII.

And then suddenly Henry showed up in Belgium near Louvain, a center of intensely Catholic anti-Protestant thought, with a bag of English gold in his pocket.

Someone, history is not quite sure who, had given him a lot of money...not enough money to make sure he would never have to work again but a lot more than a young man travelling abroad would typically carry.

The details of just how Phillips managed it are unknown. But what we do know is that one day Phillips showed up at the English House to meet Tyndale for supper.

Listen to Foxe's account from Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. I've modernized Foxe's language a bit so you can follow the story.

Sometimes Master Tyndale liked going out to dinner with a number of the merchants who helped support him; it was while he was doing so that this man Henry Philips became acquainted with him, and within a very short period of time Master Tyndale came to have sufficient confidence in him, that even brought him back to his lodging, to the house managed by Thomas Poyntz. Tyndale invited him once or twice to dinner or supper, and entered such a friendship with him, that he himself arranged for Phillips to be able to stay at the English House. Somewhere along the way Tyndale showed Phillips his books, and the other secrets of his study. He did so because he trusted him completely.

Poyntz, on the other hand, had no great confidence in Phillips and asked Tyndale how he came to know him. Tyndale explained that Phillips was an honest man, extremely bright, and quite evangelical. Poyntz, perceiving the

favor Tyndale extended to him, let the matter drop, thinking that he had probably been introduced to Tyndale by some mutual friend.¹¹

That is not the way things happened of course. There was no mutual friend.

Phillips probably introduced himself to Tyndale and then wormed his way into Tyndale's confidence. My guess is that he did that talking to Tyndale about the gospel.

Anyway, Phillips informed authorities once he was certain Tyndale was actually Tyndale and manufactured a plot to have him arrested. Phillips and the authorities both were afraid of the political ramifications of trying to take Tyndale while he was in the English House. So Phillips devised a plan to lure Tyndale away from the house and arrest him in the street.

Phillips waited until Poyntz left town a short business trip.

He then dropped by the English House and asked Tyndale if he could borrow some money. He explained his pocket purse had either been lost or stolen in the street. Tyndale gladly gave him a small sum of money...Foxe records that it was forty shillings. Phillips invited him to dinner later that afternoon. Tyndale agreed to go but insisted that he would pay for the meal. Phillips left to put a couple of men in place and then came back to get Tyndale.

He and Tyndale left the English House and started on foot to where they intended to eat. They entered a narrow alleyway that descended slightly down to another street. It was narrow enough that the two men could not walk side by side. Phillips

insisted Tyndale go first. He did that to block Tyndale's escape back up the alley. Phillips two men were at the bottom of the alley.

The two men stepped out and Phillips pointed over Tyndale's head that he was the man they were to seize.

Tyndale never saw it coming.

He was taken into custody and a few days later transferred to the fortress at Vilvoorde. His letters and papers were also seized but for some reason or another they were unable to find the Old Testament translation he was known to be working on.

We don't much about his captivity other than that he was repeatedly questioned day after day by Catholic theologians. That was not particularly because they wanted to know what he thought. It was, I think, primarily because they wanted to see if they could get him to recant. Tyndale was the biggest fish and Catholic prosecutor had ever caught. They could not get him to recant.

In fact, Tyndale had more of an impact on his examiners than they did on him. To a man they thought both godly and brilliant.

His jailor was sufficiently impressed with him that both he and his daughter converted to Protestantism.

The other thing that we know is that Tyndale was locked away in a solitary cell in the dungeon at Vilvoorde. He spent most of his nights sitting alone in the cold in the dark. We know that because of a letter he wrote to the warden of the prison. It

is quite short and quite sad but demonstrates something of Tyndale's ultimate concern and unflinching resolve.

I would like to read it to you.

I believe, most excellent Sir, that you are not unacquainted with the decision reached concerning me. On which account, I beseech your lordship, even by the Lord Jesus, that if I am to pass the winter here, to urge upon the lord commissary, if he will *condescend to do so*, to send me from my goods in his keeping a warmer cap, for I suffer greatly from cold in the head, being troubled with a continual catarrh, which is aggravated in this prison vault. A warmer coat also, for that which I have is very thin. Also cloth for repairing my leggings. My overcoat is worn out; the shirts also are worn out. He has a woolen shirt of mine, if he will please send it. I have also with him leggings of heavier cloth for overwear. He likewise has warmer nightcaps: I also ask for leave to use a lamp in the evening, for it is tiresome to sit alone in the dark. But above all, I beg and entreat your clemency earnestly to intercede with the lord commissary, that he would deign to allow me the use of my Hebrew Bible, Hebrew Grammar, and Hebrew Lexicon, and that I might employ my time with that study. Thus likewise may you obtain what you most desire, saving that it further the salvation of your soul. But if, before the end of winter, a different decision be reached concerning me, I shall be patient, and submit to the will of God to the glory of the grace of Jesus Christ my Lord, whose spirit may ever direct your heart. Amen.

W. Tyndale¹²

We have no idea whether Tyndale received any of the things that he requested.

What we do know is that 450 days after his arrest, he was officially defrocked. That would mean they dressed him clerical garments and then stripped them off him one at a time to demonstrate that he was no longer worth to be a priest. They would have also taken a dull knife and scraped his head and hands symbolically removing the oil with which he had been anointed at his ordination.

A few months later they led him up and out into the courtyard, chained him to a large post, and burned him at the stake. The last thing he ever said was, **“Lord, open the king of England’s eyes.”**

I am not sure that that ever happened. That is, I am not sure the Lord ever opened Henry the VIII’s eyes, but two years later Henry officially sanctioned the first ever authorized Bible in English. It was known as the Matthews Bible supposedly because it was translated by a man named Thomas Matthews. It wasn’t, of course, translated by Matthews. There was no Matthews. It was Tyndale’s Bible finished up by Miles Coverdale. It was assembled, edited and printed by a man John Rogers, who in turn would be burned at the stake a few years later by Bloody Mary.

Things did not end well for the man that betrayed Tyndale, Henry Phillips. He continued to drift, and steal from those that trusted him. At one point, he was so impoverished he had to see his clothes. No one knows for sure how he died. One accounts claims he was eaten by lice.

Thomas More did not live to see Tyndale’s death even though he is likely the man that paid Henry Phillips to find him and have him arrested. More was beheaded for refusing to sign the Act of Supremacy which stated that Henry’s subject owed him a greater loyalty than they owed the Pope.

Thomas Poyntz the manager of the English House, lost everything he owned trying to get Tyndale freed from prison. He wrote letter after letter and all to no

avail. He lost his business, his property, and even his family. But it really didn't matter because in one sense Tyndale was already the freest man in Europe.

So that's it. That's the story of how we came to have our Bible in English. It's a wonderful story and the extraordinary thing about it is that Tyndale's prophecy actually came true. You will remember back at the beginning, he told one priest, **"If God spare my life ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plow shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost."**

I think that that particular prophetic utterance has come true many times over.

I am no plowboy, of course, but I am enough of an East Texas hick to more or less fit loosely in the category. That is why it thrills me to know that the very first memory verse I ever memorized Genesis 2:7, "God formed man out of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul" was Tyndale's own translation taken directly over into the King James Bible.

I like that. I think Tyndale would have liked it too.

Let's pray.

¹ David Daniell, *William Tyndale: a Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 382-3.

² Brian Moynihan, *God's Bestseller* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 2002), 378.

³ Moynihan, 313.

⁴ Moynihan, 316.

⁵ Moynihan, 316.

⁶ Daniell, 317.

⁷ Daniell, 357.

⁸ Moynihan, 290.

⁹ Daniell, 361.

¹⁰ Daniell, 362-363.

¹¹ John Foxe, *Foxes Book of Martyrs*, Chapter 12.

¹² <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/1987/issue16/1632.html>