



WYLLIAMS TYNDALE MARTYR  
OLIM EX AVLA MAGD.

# William Tyndale

2026 marks the 500-year anniversary of William Tyndale's New Testament. Published in February 1526, it was the first complete English translation from the original Greek.

Tyndale, "the father of the English Bible",<sup>1</sup> ultimately gave his life so everyone from princes to ploughboys might hear the voice of God resounding from the Bible in their own language. The English-speaking Church today owes him a great debt.

But his translation was called

"poison" by the Bishop of London and he was first strangled and then burned as a martyr in 1536.

His vision was to lay the Word of God before the people of God with purity and clarity. He succeeded. He has also subsequently had more influence on the English language and literature than anyone else, including Shakespeare.

This publication commemorates his sacrifice and celebrates his staggering legacy as a mighty servant of Christ.

# A translator's life: From Gloucestershire to Germany

## EARLY LIFE IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE (c1494–1506)

William Tyndale was born in Gloucestershire around 1494.<sup>2</sup> Growing up in a prosperous cloth-trading family in the Cotswolds, he heard traders speaking Welsh, and looking over the Severn Valley likely gave him a distinct sense of another people, culture and language across the river.<sup>3</sup> The family business had connections in London and in years to come a London merchant, Humphrey Monmouth, would fund Tyndale's translation work. When Tyndale fled Roman Catholic persecution, first for Cologne and later Worms and Antwerp, he used trade routes to smuggle Bibles back to England in bales of cloth.<sup>4</sup> God providentially placed and prepared this young Gloucestershire boy to be a beacon of grace.

## STUDYING AT OXFORD (1506–1515)

Tyndale went to Oxford University around 1506.<sup>5</sup> For about nine years he studied at Magdalen Hall, now Hertford College, mastering Greek and Latin. He complained that he wasn't allowed to study Scripture until he had completed an MA. But in his Book of Martyrs, John Foxe records that Tyndale "read privily" to students and fellows "some parcel of divinity; instructing them in the knowledge and truth of the Scriptures".<sup>6</sup> His studies equipped him to translate the Athenian orator Isocrates, which Tyndale later presented to the Bishop of London in his pitch to translate the New Testament. One biographer wrote that this time "helped to make him one of the few very able scholars of Greek and Latin in the country, and, more importantly, a conscious craftsman."<sup>7</sup>



## JOINING SCHOLARS AT CAMBRIDGE (1518–1521)

Tyndale later went to Cambridge.<sup>8</sup> It was a centre of scholarship, where Erasmus had lectured from 1511–1514, and where Reformation theology blossomed. In 1521, however, the University's Chancellor ordered the public burning of Luther's books. This may have been a signal for Tyndale to move, and he found refuge as a tutor in Sir John Walsh's house back in Gloucestershire.<sup>9</sup>

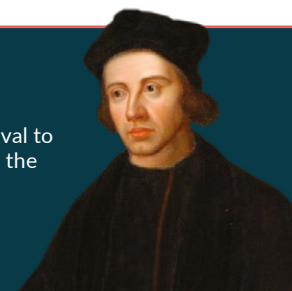
## RETURN TO GLOUCESTERSHIRE (1522–1523)

While tutoring in the Walsh home, Tyndale also fervently preached the Gospel locally. Disputing with "a learned man" who said it would be better to have the Pope's word than God's law, Tyndale replied, "**I defy the pope and all his laws; if God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth a plough to know more of the Scripture than thou dost.**"<sup>10</sup> With his evangelical notoriety growing, he had to move again.



## TRANSLATION IN LONDON (1523–1524)

Tyndale went to London to petition Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall for approval to translate the Bible into English. Tunstall refused, and Tyndale turned to the underground network of Protestant merchants. Humphrey Monmouth funded the project, and after several months in London, Tyndale travelled to Germany.<sup>11</sup>



## WORK CONTINUES IN WITTENBERG (1524)

Based on the accusations of Tyndale's enemies that he spent time with "the arch-heretic Luther", historians speculate that Tyndale initially found good working arrangements in Wittenberg – where Luther was based. He moved to Cologne, where he completed his translation, and had it printed.<sup>12</sup>



## PRINTING IN COLOGNE (1525)

Copies of Tyndale's translation began to be produced by the eminent printer Peter Quentell. But a Roman Catholic informant scuppered the project – learning of the translation after taking Quentell's assistants drinking in a tavern. The authorities raided the print shop and stopped the work after only Matthew's Gospel was completed. Tyndale managed to escape up the Rhine to Worms where he could finally print his 1526 English New Testament in full.<sup>13</sup>



# Betrayal and death

## TREACHEROUS FRIEND

In the early 1530s, Henry Phillips was sent to London with a large sum of money for an associate of his prominent father, Richard Phillips, but lost it all gambling. He fled to Louvain, a strongly Roman Catholic city near Antwerp (right). He was paid to covertly infiltrate the house where Tyndale was staying and have him arrested. Foxe records how, having befriended him, Tyndale invited Phillips to dinner one evening. As they approached the narrow lane near Tyndale's house, Phillips allowed him to go first, into the arms of two waiting officers.<sup>14</sup>



## IMPRISONMENT

Tyndale was imprisoned at Vilvoorde Castle for around 500 days from May 1535. In a letter discovered centuries later, Tyndale described suffering from the cold, his clothes being worn through, and finding it "wearisome sitting alone in the dark". He asked for his Hebrew Bible, and signed off, "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."<sup>15</sup> Foxe writes that "Such was the power of his doctrine, and the sincerity of his life," that during his imprisonment "he converted, it is said, his keeper, the keeper's daughter, and others of his household".<sup>16</sup> Indeed, "He had so preached to them who had him in charge, and such as was there conversant with him in the Castle that they reported of him, that if he were not a good Christian man, they knew not whom they might take to be one."<sup>17</sup>

## MARTYRDOM

Thomas Cromwell wrote from England to try to secure Tyndale's release but to no avail. In August 1536, Tyndale was defrocked as a priest: led onto a high platform, in full view of the public, anointing oil was symbolically scraped from his hands, the bread and wine of the Supper was removed from him, and he was stripped of his priestly vestments. Probably in October 1536, he was executed – tied to a stake, strangled and burned. Foxe records that he shouted "at the stake with fervent zeal, and a loud voice, **'Lord! Open the king of England's eyes.'**"<sup>18</sup>



# 'A door of light to the eyes'

## TYNDALE'S SOURCES

Tyndale had access to some crucial sources for his work, including: Erasmus's *Novum Instrumentum* (1516) – a cutting-edge, Greek New Testament with Latin translation; Luther's German translation of the New Testament, Jonah and the Pentateuch; and the Latin Vulgate.<sup>19</sup>



## THEOLOGICAL IMPACT

By translating from the original Greek into English, Tyndale brought fresh clarity to the proclamation of God's grace. The Greek word for "repentance" (*metanoia*) had been translated *paenitentiam agite* – "do penance" – by Jerome in the Latin Vulgate, and this mistranslation stood for 1,000 years as foundational for the Roman Catholic doctrine of works righteousness and later the sale of indulgences. With Tyndale's translation, the means of dispelling this false teaching was finally unleashed in the English language.<sup>24</sup>

## THE 1526 NEW TESTAMENT

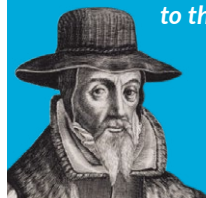
The first complete English New Testament was printed in early 1526, probably by Peter Schoeffer. Gordon Campbell writes, "It was a pocket-sized book, and was quickly smuggled into England, where it was sold cheaply."<sup>20</sup> Church authorities tried to stamp it out. From October 1526, it was banned and described by the Bishop of London as the "most pernicious poison dispersed throughout all our dioceses of London in great numbers."<sup>21</sup> There was a public burning of confiscated copies at St Paul's Cathedral on 27 October 1526.<sup>22</sup> Bishop Tunstall travelled to Antwerp and had an English merchant buy the entire stock of

Tyndale's Bibles for burning. The first edition appears to have had 3,000 copies, but only three survive – two in London, one in Stuttgart.<sup>23</sup>



“These books being sent over into England, it cannot be spoken what a door of light they opened to the eyes of the whole English nation, which before were shut up in darkness.”

John Foxe<sup>25</sup>



# Tyndale's legacy

## THE GIFT OF SCRIPTURE

Tyndale has been described as “the man who laid the foundation of the Bible in English” – which is spoken today by over 1.5 billion people.<sup>26</sup> Tyndale wrote, “I call God to record against the day we shall appear before our Lord Jesus, that I never altered one syllable of God’s Word against my conscience, nor would do this day, if all that is in earth, whether it be honour, pleasure, or riches, might be given me.”<sup>27</sup> As servant and martyr of Christ, he left a mighty legacy that the Church still benefits from, 500 years on.



## TRANSLATION NOW

Although one-in-five people globally are still waiting for the Bible in their own language, at least two newly translated Bibles and New Testaments are launched every week. Work is currently under way in over 4,000 languages.<sup>28</sup> We can give thanks for the many modern-day Tyndales that God has raised up.

## THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

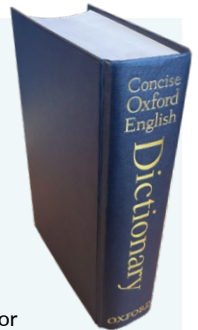
Tyndale's impact on the English language was immense. The first recorded use of numerous terms – such as “scapegoat”, “ungodly”, “uproar”, “stiff-necked”, “brokenhearted”, “castaway”, “busybody” and “taskmaster” – is in Tyndale's translations.<sup>29</sup>

Many now familiar biblical phrases and figures of speech also originated with Tyndale, including:

- Daily bread (Matthew 6:11)
- Consider the lilies of the field (Matthew 6:28)
- Only begotten Son (John 1:14, 18)

- A law unto themselves (Romans 2:14)
- God forbid (Romans 3:4)
- The powers that be (Romans 13:1)
- Fight the good fight (1 Timothy 6:12)
- Behold, I stand at the door and knock (Revelation 3:20)<sup>30</sup>

Later versions heavily relied on Tyndale's work – 90 per cent of the King James Version's New Testament is his translation.<sup>31</sup>



References at [the.ci/tyndale-ref](https://the.ci/tyndale-ref)



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