

WILLIAM TYNDALE



William Tyndale was born in England near the Welsh border around 1494. He was educated at Oxford, and by the age of twenty-one he knew eight different languages. William was ordained as a priest and became a tutor to the household of Sir John Welsh. William's greatest desire was to translate the Bible into English so that everyone in the country could read God's Word for themselves. However, King Henry VIII, his advisors, and some





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church officials thought otherwise. They thought the Bible should only be read by church leaders in Latin, and then they would explain God's Word to the people. So William decided to work secretly on his translation of the Bible. But where could he do that in safety if the King and the church leaders were watching him? Friends smuggled William out of England to the European continent. Over the next ten years William moved from place to place, outrunning agents of the King and church who searched everywhere for him to put him in prison. During that time, William was able to translate the entire New Testament and write several books, all of which were smuggled back into England for people to read. This only fuelled the anger of the King, who redoubled his efforts to find William Tyndale and put an end to his life.



GOD'S SECRET AGENT

(1535-36)

A quiet voice urged William, 'this way,' as he followed his guide through the winding streets of Antwerp. The sun had set a while ago and the gathering shadows made it difficult to see the way. William, shifting his small trunk of books and papers in his arms, was glad he wasn't alone in this Belgium city.

William had met the young man sent by an English merchant, Thomas Poyntz, near the city gates earlier in the day, but they had waited until now to creep into the city. A printer had recently been arrested for printing copies of Protestant literature. No one was quite sure who had informed on him. So they weren't taking any chances.

After a few more darkening streets, the guide led William to the river's edge.

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'The third house along,' the young man said. 'Mr. Poyntz lives there. It's all right here. You'll be safe.'

William hesitated at first, as the young man slipped away into the night. After so many years of hiding, could he really live in a house and sleep in a bed like everyone else? God had protected him the last ten years, allowing him to finish translating all of the New Testament and the first five books of the Old. But he never had a place to settle, where it was safe to go out in daylight hours. He would spend his days poring over the Greek and Latin texts of the Bible and searching for just the right words to translate them into English. Then he arranged to have his translations printed. That was dangerous because it was against the law. Finding a printer who was willing to risk the punishment was difficult. More than once William's printers had been caught and questioned, forcing William to run for his life before the soldiers found him too.

Had he now found a safe place?

William hitched up the small trunk and walked down to the house.

The door opened immediately. Thomas, a prosperous looking English merchant, dressed in a green doublet that hung to his knees over brown hose, and a fur lined coat, welcomed him. 'Come in, come in, my friend,' he said with a smile.

William, dressed in a priest's simple black robe, stepped through the door into a brightly lit room with a fire burning warmly in a stone fireplace.

'Are you sure this is a good idea?' William asked anxiously. 'What about your safety, and your family?'

'This area of Antwerp belongs to us merchants. The local officials will not interfere with anyone who lives here. You have been in hiding too long. You need someone to take care of you. My wife will soon see to fattening you up.' Thomas laughed as he patted his own rounded tummy that bulged a little over his belt.

William sighed with relief. A number of English merchants had settled in the city, bringing trade and wealth to the area. The city officials wanted them to stay. So they had offered the merchants their own area to live in and do as they pleased.

If only some of William's other friends had found such safety. Over the years the king's spies had caught others who were also writing Christian books to encourage those of the reformed faith. In their books, they spoke out about the wrong things that some of the church leaders were teaching. So they had been arrested and killed. It made William very sad when he thought of them.

'There is one thing you must remember, William,' Thomas added as he showed his guest the room set



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aside for him. 'You are free to walk about the streets in this part of the city only. If you leave the English merchant area you may well be arrested and I would have difficulty helping you.'

William nodded absently. He was looking about the chamber, pleased to see a large table set by a window, a perfect place to lay out his books and writing materials. A bed stood against the opposite wall, along with a large chest to store his meagre collection of clothing. 'This room is wonderful. So bright and pleasant after the hovels I've had to hide in over the years.'

Thomas smiled at his enthusiasm and was glad he could use his wealth to help, but he worried that William had not really listened to what he had said. And sure enough, a few weeks later Thomas had to remind him again.

William had arrived back at the merchant's house while the evening meal was being served. As he entered he saw the Poyntz family assembled at the wooden trestle table, already enjoying a thick stew in bread trenchers. William made his apologies for being late as Thomas invited him to take a place at the table. Mrs. Poyntz called the maid to prepare a trencher for William.

'Where have you been, my friend?' Thomas inquired. 'I was concerned when I didn't find you in your chamber busy with your books.'

William shook his head. 'I don't study on Saturdays. Don't forget I'm also a minister and I must do some pastoral work. There are many in the city who need comfort and assurance in these difficult times.'

Thomas was concerned. 'Yes, I understand, but you preach every Sunday when we gather for worship in people's homes. Isn't that enough? You really need to be careful when you are about the city streets.'

'Don't worry, Thomas,' William assured him. 'I'll be careful. This is excellent food,' he added between mouthfuls.

Thomas' wife smiled, glad to see her house guest eating well. Then Thomas asked, 'How's your revision of the New Testament coming along? Have you corrected all the printing errors yet?'

'Just about. And I've also been looking at some of the English words I had used and changing some of them to make the Biblical passages clearer. It's a lot of work, but this edition will be easier to read.'

'Excellent,' Thomas replied. 'Then I will let our friend know he should get his printing press ready.'

Once the new edition was printed, the merchants began to bundle up the books and hide them in sacks of grain and other goods. The sacks were loaded onto

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the merchant ships and sent on their way to London. The merchants who received the sacks in England carefully removed the books before selling the goods. Then they secretly passed out the Bibles to those who longed to read God's Word for themselves. However, some of the copies were found by the Bishop of London.

'How did these Bibles get into England?' the Bishop demanded of one of his spies.

The man shook his head, stepping back to avoid being hit by the Bible the Bishop threw at him.

'Get out there and buy up all the Bibles you can find and burn them. I want England purged of these wretched translations!'

His servant fled from the room to obey his master's instructions. But the Bishop knew he couldn't burn all the copies. The only way to stop people from reading the Bible in English was to stop the man who was translating them. So he began to make a clever plan.

After a year in Antwerp, William was much healthier and still enjoying Thomas Poyntz's hospitality. In fact the generous allowance that Thomas gave him made it possible for William to help those who had fled from England to avoid persecution. They didn't have wealthy friends like Thomas Poyntz, so William took the money he was given and gave it to his fellow Christians who were poor and in need of food. In this way many of them managed to survive.

One day as William was visiting a poor widow, he was approached by a handsome young man. William didn't notice him at first, because he stood respectfully out of the way as William had gone into the widow's cottage. When he came out, the young man was still there.

'Mr. Tyndale?' the young man asked.

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William was immediately on his guard. Anyone asking after him was usually a spy or at least someone who would betray him to the authorities.

The young man didn't wait for a reply before explaining himself. 'I'm a student at the University in Louvain, not far from here. I rode over to meet with some reformed Christians and I've lost the directions. Someone over there pointed you out to me and said you would know how to find them.'

William hesitated, studying the young man's face. He looked genuine, but after so many years of hiding from spies, William didn't know who to trust anymore. 'Where are you staying?' he asked.

The young man pointed to an inn at the end of the street. 'My name is Henry Phillips,' he said. 'Would you like to share a meal with me at the inn? I have some questions about something I read in the Bible. Maybe you could explain it to me?'

William had finished his visits for the day, so he agreed to go with Henry. Maybe if they talked about the Bible, William could decide if Henry was really interested or just pretending.

William was surprised and pleased to discover that Henry had indeed read the English Bible and had some very good questions. They spent several hours at the inn discussing the doctrines found in parts of Paul's letters.

When William arrived back at the Poyntz home, he was excited to tell Thomas about his new friend. 'He is a student and a very able one. He's sincerely interested in God's Word. I was going to invite him to our worship service but I thought I should tell you first.'

Thomas rubbed his chin, a little worried. 'Are you sure he's not a spy? I don't want to endanger you or our congregation. Why did he just suddenly turn up and seek you out?'

William shrugged. 'I don't know, but I'm sure he's not a spy. Meet him for yourself,' William urged. 'See what you think.'

'Hmmm...I suppose we could invite him over for a meal. Ask him to come on Monday and we'll see if he's genuine.'

On Monday, Henry bowed graciously to Thomas and presented Mrs. Poyntz with a bouquet of wildflowers. There were smiles all round as the young man told them stories of his fellow students and professors. And then they all became serious as they began to discuss a particular passage from Romans that Henry said he still didn't fully understand.

After he left, Thomas said, 'Well, he's certainly a personable young man, and as you said, has a grasp of Christian doctrine. I guess it will be safe to let him into our little congregation.'



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And so Henry became a part of the English group that met every Sunday to worship God. He even began to accompany William on his pastoral visits to the poor of Antwerp, taking advantage of the time they walked between houses to ask more questions about the Bible. He appeared to be hungry to learn as much of God's Word as he could.

One day in May, after spending the morning with William, Henry suggested that they stop at an inn for a meal. 'I know a very good place,' he said. 'It's over on the next street. If we go through this passageway here we can take a shortcut.' Henry stepped back to let William go first.

William smiled at his friend and started down the narrow stone passage between two houses. But as he came to the end he saw two soldiers waiting there. William started to turn around to run to safety, but Henry was right behind him. There was no room to get around the young man. William was caught between Henry and the soldiers.

'You're not getting away this time,' said Henry with a grim smile. 'Soldier, this is William Tyndale. Arrest him!'

William looked at Henry in disbelief as the soldiers began to fasten chains to his wrists. Henry's face flushed red.



'I had to do it,' he said bitterly. 'I had no money. The Bishop paid all my debts, gave me clothes and told me to find you. I had no choice.'

William said nothing, but Henry knew very well there was always a choice between right and wrong, however difficult. As the soldiers led William away Henry decided to go to the inn himself. He was going to drink a large tankard of ale, even if he didn't really feel like celebrating.

William, still bound with chains, was thrust into a wooden cage on a large wagon. The rough wood hurt his back as the wagon bumped along the road. He knew where they were taking him. Vilvoorde Castle. Other reformers had been captured and put there, only to waste away and die in the terrible dungeons. William began to pray, asking God for courage to face the imprisonment. He wasn't angry or even very surprised at finally becoming a prisoner after all those years of running and hiding. He knew that at sometime he would very likely be killed for his defiance of the king and church leaders. And he also knew that he would do it all over again. Nothing was more important than God's Word, and God had allowed him the privilege of translating it into English. Now anyone in England who had a desire to read God's Word could do so.

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Devotional Thought:

*God is our refuge and strength, a very present
help in trouble.*

Psalm 46:1

William might well have remembered this verse as he sat in that dark, damp dungeon. God was his refuge or safe place. William could go to God with his fears, worries and pain and know that God would give him the strength to carry on. And notice the second half of the verse: God is a 'very present help in trouble.' 'Very present' is there to emphasise that God's help is right there when we need it. And it comes at the right time, when we are in the middle of troubles and difficulties. None of us are likely to have to go to prison for serving God as William did, but there are just as many other times where we need God's help. There might be difficult situations in our family, our school or our neighbourhood that God knows all about. He is the safe place we can run to in prayer and he will give us strength and help to meet those difficulties.

William was kept in prison for eighteen months. At his trial some church leaders lectured him on how wrong he was to defy the laws of the king who had prohibited an English Bible. William remained strong even when the judge sentenced him to death by strangulation and burning. He counted it all joy to suffer for God.



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Just before he died, William prayed out loud for all to hear. 'Lord, open the King of England's eyes.' And God answered William's prayer. Just three years later, King Henry decided to lift the ban on the translation of the English Bible. And not only that. He passed a law that said every church must have an English Bible on display, available to anyone who wished to read it. God, who is greater than any king, can change a king's heart.

