

## *The Treasure of the Bible in our Own Language*

A few years ago when my wife, Trish, and I were preparing to move house, as we were packing the books from our shelves, I was struck by the fact that I had two big shelves full of Bibles – so many that I was unable to fit them all onto a single shelf. Yes, in this case it is true that my cup runneth over!

Over the years, Trish and I have collected all kinds and versions of Bibles – King James, New King James, Revised Standard, New English, Moffatt, Children's – you name it, we probably have at least one copy of it!

Now please don't get me wrong. We are not rich by today's North American standards, and we never have been! Most of these Bibles we picked up at very low prices at Goodwill or Salvation Army thrift stores.

However, if we were living in England in the mis-named "good old days" of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, and if A Roman Catholic priest were to visit our home, and if he were to see my many English language Bibles, he would angrily declare us to be "heretics," he would send for whatever "police" they had in those days; Trish and I would be tried, convicted and executed. We would be burnt at the stake!

For what crime? For the crime of owning an English language Bible!

In this article, I would like to discuss with you what a true blessing it is to have the Holy Bible freely available to us in our own languages. I would also like to encourage you not take this tremendous blessing for granted.

## ***God Intended us to have Free Access to the Scriptures***

God obviously did – and still does – intend that we have free access to His Holy Scriptures in our own languages:

**Now these... [the Jewish Christians living at Berea]... were more noble than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so. (Acts 17:11)**

These Berean church members were commended by God through Paul for searching the scriptures daily – for proving all things. It is logical that these Bereans must have had free access to the scriptures in a language they understood.

My copy of Strong's Concordance has a section entitled “Uses of God's Word” and it solidly backs up each point with supporting scriptures. The points include:

- Spiritual regeneration and growth,
- Salvation and sanctification,
- The searching of hearts,
- Helping keep us from sin,
- Helping us to defeat Satan,
- The proving of the truth.

How could we use the scriptures in these ways if we had no free access and were not able to understand them?

Also with solid scriptural authority, Strong lists positive attitudes toward God's Word – including exhortations to:

- Read it and search it daily,
- Obey it,
- Love it and delight in it,
- Let it dwell in us richly,
- Receive it with meekness,
- Teach it to our children.

How could we do these things if the only Bibles available to us were in Hebrew, Chaldean, Greek, Aramaic or, worst case, Latin? Or if the only copies were in the hands of the local minister?

Yes, of course God's people really do need ministerial guidance on a regular basis, in the form of sermons, sermonettes, Bible studies, written articles, etc.

Also, as it is true that no version of the Bible is a 100% perfect translation, it is right for us to examine the Hebrew, Chaldean, Aramaic and Greek in order for us to try to determine the original intent of the words.

## *A Brief History of the English Bible*

As early as the Seventh Century AD, some passages were translated from Latin into the Anglo-Saxon language of that day. After the Norman Conquest in 1066, most Bible manuscripts in England were in French or Anglo-Norman – both of which were unintelligible to the majority of the English people.

Skipping forward three hundred years to the Fourteenth Century, things had regressed rather than progressing. The only Bibles in England were in Latin, and were for the exclusive use of the Roman Catholic clergy, who had been trained in that language.

But in 1382, the very first full English translation was put together by John Wycliffe (1328-1384), a Yorkshire-born theologian, lay preacher, translator, reformist, university teacher and early dissident in the Roman Catholic Church. For his efforts, Wycliffe was severely persecuted by the corrupt church authorities. Why?

Because their false doctrines were exposed by God's written Word, which he was then making understandable.

Wycliffe would probably have been tried and executed by the powerful ecclesiastical courts, but for some support he received from English royalty. He died on the last day of 1384 following a stroke and his popularity grew. However, thirty years after his death, the Council of Constance under Pope Martin V, declared Wycliffe "a stiff-necked heretic," that his books be burned and his remains be exhumed, burned, and the ashes cast into the River Swift in Leicestershire.

Wycliffe's Bible had somewhat limited success because, as printing was still in its infancy in Europe, all of the copies were handwritten.

The Germans pioneered the printing press and were the first to print the Bible in their own language in 1450 – again to the ire of the established church.

Seventy-five years later in 1525, the first printed English translation of the New Testament was produced by William Tyndale (1494-1536). Let us pause to focus on this man of courage. From a very early age, Tyndale became determined to combat the corruption of the Roman Catholic church, to extend scriptural knowledge to the common people, and to translate God's Word from the "original" languages into English.

It should go almost without saying that the English Roman Catholic ecclesiastical authorities vigorously opposed Tyndale's translations and that they constantly persecuted him. This harassment forced Tyndale to arrange for his printing to be done in Germany.

As we have seen, the Roman Catholic church were not shy about exercising their power to have fellow Englishmen executed for mere possession of non-Latin Bibles. Thus, many well-meaning people were burnt at the stake. Again, their “crime” was that of searching for the plain truth of God.

Tyndale began printing his English language New Testament in the German city of Cologne and completed at the city of Worms (pronounced “Voorm”). Eighteen thousand copies were printed and were smuggled into England in flour barrels and the like. So intensive was the Catholic church’s programme to oppose Tyndale’s efforts that today, only two complete volumes of his New Testament remain in existence, plus a few fragments.

In 1530 in Germany and Antwerp (which is now part of Belgium), Tyndale began translating and printing the Pentateuch and other books of the Old Testament.

Some brave and committed colleagues who aided Tyndale in the importing and distribution of his Bibles were caught and put to the flame. The English Roman Catholic authorities sent spies to find Tyndale. He was betrayed and arrested in Antwerp in 1535. His trial took place after sixteen months in prison under dreadful conditions. Then on October 6<sup>th</sup> 1536, William Tyndale was publicly strangled and burnt at the stake.

Tyndale’s and Wycliffe’s translations were the basis of the 1611 Authorized – or King James – Version.

The very first complete (Old Testament and New), printed, English language Bible was published by Myles Coverdale in 1535, while Tyndale was still languishing in his miserable Antwerp cell. Poor Coverdale spent the rest of his life running between England and the comparative safety of Europe, depending on the religious persuasion of the monarch that sat on the English throne.

The Bible was first divided into chapter and verse in 1560 by a group of exiled Englishmen (possibly including Coverdale) in Switzerland. This was called the “Geneva Bible.”

In 1582 – less than fifty years after burning Tyndale at the stake for his “crime” of publishing and circulating a non-Latin Bible, the Roman Catholic’s published their own, “official” English language New Testament – the “Douay-Rheims Version.” Their Old Testament followed in 1610.

## ***Comparison with “Bible Era” Martyrdoms***

Let us briefly compare Wycliffe, Tyndale, Coverdale and other English Bible heroes with the martyrs of Bible times:

**And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him. (Acts 22:20)**

Why was Stephen martyred? For generally the same reason as Jesus was murdered – for boldly preaching God’s truth; for clarifying God's Word, wishes and priorities for the common man; for removing man-made veils of secrecy and mystery.

Who had Stephen killed? The corrupt First Century religious powers – men with wrong priorities; men whose main desire was to maintain their own influence, prominence, importance and power.

The similarities are easy to see between these men and the Sixteenth Century Roman Catholic powers who persecuted and executed Tyndale and his faithful colleagues.

**Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: and others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yes, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. (Hebrews 11:35-38)**

Perhaps these translators and their helpers were not baptized Church of God members. But it appears that they were strongly used by God. Like the heroes listed in chapter eleven of the book of Hebrews, for God's holy Word and truth, they willingly and courageously gave up their comforts and freedoms, their peace, their precious home country, and in some cases, their very lives. They were not willing to allow the wicked veil of a false and corrupt priesthood and the Latin language to remain over the understanding of the common man and to bend and pervert God’s holy Word.

Like the early Hebrews 11 Christian heroes, Wycliffe, Tyndale, Coverdale and their supporters allowed themselves to be used by God. They gave themselves as sacrifices so that the truth may be made freely available to the common man.

Sad to say that, in our so-called “enlightened” age, the average common man has little use for this priceless jewel that God gave us through these brave men.

But *we* common men – women too, of course – we members of God’s true church – we owe these Fourteenth and Sixteenth Century heroes a sincere debt of gratitude. Let us never take their efforts and sacrifices for granted.

When we meet them at the time of their resurrection, we should look forward to giving these men a very sincere “Thank You!”

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