



The Daring Mission of

William Tyndale

STEVEN J. LAWSON



A Long Line of Godly Men Profile

ENDORSEMENTS

“Few people reading the Bible in English today understand the debt they owe to the martyr William Tyndale. Even among those who know the name of the fountainhead of modern English Bible translation, few realize that Tyndale fervently stood for the doctrines of justification by faith alone and salvation by grace alone. This little gem of a book reveals Tyndale’s labors for the truth, his sufferings for the truth, and his love for the truth. May God use Steven Lawson’s book to cause such love to burn in many others.”

—DR. JOEL R. BEEKE
President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary
Grand Rapids, Michigan

“Much more than a biography, this thrilling chronicle quickens the Christian heart and stokes the fires of resolve to courageously defend and proclaim the truth. Dr. Lawson’s diligent work on William Tyndale should be considered essential reading for every English-speaking believer, as it carefully unfolds the forgotten legacy of God’s faithfulness in using one man, against all odds, to bring us the gospel in the English language.”

—DAVID PARSONS
Founder, Truth Remains
Granada Hills, California

“In the history of the Christian faith among English-speaking peoples, it was William Tyndale’s translation of the Bible that made of them a people of the Book. His life was poured out even to the point of death to achieve this goal, and every generation of believers needs to hear the story of his life and death afresh. And one of the best guides to his story and its lessons for our day is this new study by Steve Lawson. Highly recommended!”

—MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN
Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, Kentucky

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William Tyndale

The Long Line of Godly Men Profiles

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A Long Line of Godly Men Profile

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William Tyndale

STEPHEN J. LAWSON

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Published by Reformation Trust Publishing

a division of Ligonier Ministries

421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771

Ligonier.org ReformationTrust.com

Printed in Crawfordsville, Indiana

RR Donnelley and Sons

January 2016

First edition

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Cover illustration: Steven Noble

Interior design and typeset: Katherine Lloyd, The DESK

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lawson, Steven J.

The daring mission of William Tyndale / Steven J. Lawson. -- First edition.

pages cm. -- (A long line of godly men profile)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-56769-435-2 -- ISBN 1-56769-435-7

1. Tyndale, William, -1536. 2. Reformation--England--Biography.

3. Bible. English--Versions--History--16th century. I. Title.

BR350.T8L39 2015

270.6092--dc23

[B]

2014036617

This book is dedicated
to a faithful friend,
David Parsons,
a man who shares my passion and zeal
for the written Word of God
and its chief English translator and heroic martyr,
William Tyndale

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Followers Worthy to Be Followed

Down through the centuries, God has raised up a long line of godly men whom He has used mightily at strategic moments in church history. These valiant individuals have come from all walks of life, from the ivy-covered halls of elite schools to the dusty back rooms of tradesmen's shops. They have arisen from all points of this world, from highly visible venues in densely populated cities to obscure hamlets in remote places. Yet despite these differences, these pivotal figures have had much in common.

First and foremost, each man possessed an unwavering faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But more can be said about these luminous figures. Each of these stalwarts of the faith also held deep convictions in the God-exalting truths known as the doctrines of grace. Though they differed in secondary matters of theology, they stood shoulder to shoulder in

embracing these biblical teachings that magnify the sovereign grace of God in salvation. These spiritual leaders upheld the foundational truth that “salvation is of the Lord.”¹

The doctrines of grace humbled their souls before God and kindled their hearts with greater passion for God. These truths of divine sovereignty emboldened these men to rise up and advance the cause of Christ in their generation. Any survey of redemptive history reveals that those who embrace these core Reformed truths are granted larger measures of confidence in their God. With an enlarged vision for the expanse of His kingdom upon the earth, they stepped forward boldly to accomplish the work of ten, twenty, even thirty men. These luminous individuals arose with wings like eagles and soared above their times. The doctrines of grace empowered them to serve God in their divinely appointed hour of history, leaving a godly inheritance for future generations to come.

This Long Line of Godly Men Profiles series highlights key figures in the age-long procession of these sovereign-grace men. The purpose of this series is to explore how these figures used their God-given gifts and abilities to impact their times and further the kingdom of heaven. Because they were courageous followers of Christ, their examples are worthy of emulation today.

This volume focuses upon the man regarded as the father of the English Bible, William Tyndale. In the sixteenth century, Tyndale forsook his native land of England and traveled

1. Ps. 3:8; Jonah 2:9.

to Europe in order to translate the Bible into the language of his countrymen. In an hour marked with great spiritual darkness, and at the cost of his own life, Tyndale courageously gave the English-speaking world a Bible they could read and understand. Perhaps no other Englishman has ever been used to affect the spiritual lives of so many people for so many centuries. William Tyndale stands as a towering figure, eminently worthy to be profiled in this series. Never have so many owed so much to so singular an effort.

May the Lord use this book to embolden a new generation of believers to bring its witness for Jesus Christ upon this world. Through this profile of Tyndale, may you be strengthened to walk in a manner worthy of your calling. May you be zealous in your study of the written Word of God for the exaltation of Christ and the advance of His kingdom.

Soli Deo gloria
—Steven J. Lawson
Series editor

Father of the English Bible

Every true progress in church history is conditioned by a new and deeper study of the Scriptures. . . . While the Humanists went back to the ancient classics and revived the spirit of Greek and Roman paganism, the Reformers went back to the sacred Scriptures in the original languages and revived the spirit of apostolic Christianity.¹

—PHILIP SCHAFF

Featured prominently in my study, as though looking over my right shoulder, is a reproduction of a stunning portrait of the great Bible translator William Tyndale. Painted in oil on canvas, the original work is from the brush of an unknown artist. It was produced in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century and now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery

1. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7 (1888; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 1.

in London.² As the subject of the portrait, Tyndale is seated, dressed all in black, and surrounded by a subdued dark-brown background. His face and hands seem to glow from the light of a candle that is hidden from view.

Tyndale's left hand is balancing a book, keeping it horizontal lest it fall. This book is a Bible, the collection of divinely inspired writings that Tyndale devoted his life to translating from the Hebrew and Greek into English. His right hand appears to be resting on a dark table, while his right index finger is pointing emphatically to the Bible. Tyndale is directing the observer's attention away from himself, and instead drawing every eye toward this sacred Book in which he resolutely believed and to which he dedicated his whole life.

Beneath the Bible, the artist has painted an unfurled banner, seemingly suspended in air. Signifying Tyndale as an Oxford and Cambridge scholar, the writing on the banner is in Latin: *Hac ut luce tuas dispergam Roma tenebras sponte extorris ero sponte sacrificium*. This means, "To scatter Roman darkness by this light, the loss of land and life I will reckon slight." This bold message represents the life's mission of Tyndale. By translating the Bible into English, this brilliant linguist ignited the flame that would banish the spiritual darkness in England. Tyndale's translation of the Scriptures unveiled the divine light

2. One of the most recognizable and famous portraits of William Tyndale hangs in the dining hall of Hertford College, Oxford University. The portrait to which I am referring is now part of the primary collection of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

of biblical truth that would shine across the English-speaking world, ushering in the dawning of a new day.

In the background of this portrait, behind Tyndale, are the words *Gulielmus Tindilus Martyr*. This is the Latin rendering of this scholar's first and last name, along with the word *martyr*, which identifies the high cost paid by Tyndale to bring the Scriptures into the language of his countrymen. This heroic figure died a martyr's death in 1536, strangled to death by an iron chain, after which his corpse was burned and blown up by gunpowder that had been spread around his incinerated body.

At the bottom of the portrait, there is a panel giving the explanation of Tyndale's martyrdom. The words are in Latin and translate as follows:

This picture represents, as far as art could, William Tyndale, sometime student of this Hall [Magdalen] and its ornament, who after establishing here the happy beginnings of a purer theology, at Antwerp devoted his energies to translating into the vernacular the New Testament and the Pentateuch, a labour so greatly tending to the salvation of his fellow-countrymen that he was rightly called the Apostle of England. He gained his martyr's crown at Vilvoorde near Brussels in 1536, a man, if we may believe even his adversary (the Emperor's Procurator General), learned, pious, and good.

The irony of this portrait is that Tyndale never sat for such a rendering. To protect his anonymity, he could not have his facial likeness reproduced onto canvas. The work he carried out came at too high a price to allow himself to be recognized. Only after his gruesome death could Tyndale be known.

This portrait of Tyndale hangs in my study as a constant visual reminder of the invaluable treasure that sits on my desk: the English Bible. It underscores the fact that as I preach its truths, spiritual light is being sent forth into this dark world. Moreover, this portrait bears witness to me of the great price required to unveil its truth in this sin-blackened age.

As Tyndale entered the world scene, England lay covered under a dark night of spiritual darkness. The church in England remained shrouded in the midnight of spiritual ignorance. The knowledge of the Scriptures had been all but extinguished in the land. Although there were some twenty thousand priests in England, it was said that they could not so much as translate into English a simple clause from the *Pater noster*—the Lord's Prayer. The clergy were so bogged down in a mire of religious superstition that they had no knowledge of the truth. The only English Scriptures were a few hand-copied Wycliffe Bibles, translated from the Latin Vulgate at the end of the fourteenth century. The Lollards, a small band of courageous preachers and followers of Wycliffe, unlawfully distributed these banned books. The mere possession of Wycliffe's translation led many to suffer. Some even faced death.

In 1401, Parliament passed legislation known as the *De*

haeretico comburendo, which, as its title indicates, legalized the burning of heretics at the stake. Because of the perceived threat of the Lollards, translating the Bible into English was considered a capital crime. In 1408, Thomas Arundell, the archbishop of Canterbury, wrote the Constitutions of Oxford, forbidding any translation of the Bible into English unless authorized by the bishops:

It is a dangerous thing . . . to translate the text of the Holy Scripture out of one tongue into another, for in the translation the same sense is not always easily kept. . . . We therefore decree and ordain, that no man hereafter, by his own authority translate any text of the Scripture into English or any other tongue. . . . No man can read any such book . . . in part or in whole.³

Even teaching the Bible unlawfully in English was considered a crime worthy of death. In 1519, seven Lollards were burned at the stake for teaching their children the Lord's Prayer in English. A spiritual night had fallen over the land of England. The darkness that covered her could not have been any more stark.

At the same time, the Reformation fires were igniting places such as Wittenberg and Zürich and could not be contained. Sparks of divine truth soon leapt across the English Channel and ignited the dry tinder in England. By 1520, the

3. Brian Moynahan, *God's Bestseller: William Tyndale, Thomas More, and the Writing of the English Bible; A Story of Martyrdom and Betrayal* (New York: St. Martin's, 2002), 1.

works of Luther were being read and discussed by scholars in Oxford and Cambridge. Fanning this flame was the availability of Erasmus' Greek New Testament with his companion Latin translation that had been compiled in 1516, one year before Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses. This resource was of great value to scholars, who read Greek and Latin. But it was of no use to the common Englishman, who could not read either language. If the Reformation were to come to England, it would not be enough to merely cry *sola Scriptura*. There must be the translation of the Bible into the English language for the people to read. But how would this ever come about?

In this dark hour, God raised up William Tyndale, an unmatched individual who possessed extraordinary linguistic skills combined with an unwavering devotion to the Bible. He was a remarkable scholar, proficient in eight languages—Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, English, German, and French. He possessed an unsurpassed ability to work with the sounds, rhythms, and senses of the English language. But in order to do his translation work, he would be forced to leave his native England, never to return. This resilient figure would live underground as a condemned heretic and hunted fugitive for the last twelve years of his life. He would eventually pay the ultimate price in giving his life unto a martyr's death to provide his countrymen with the New Testament and half of the Old Testament in English. His feat of translating the Bible into English from the original Greek and Hebrew had never

before been accomplished. This remarkable Reformer would become the most significant of the early English Protestants.

It is this man, William Tyndale, whom we will consider in this small volume. Here is a man who gave the English-speaking people the Bible in their own language. May he be always esteemed as the one who first made the Scripture an accessible book to the common person in English.

Before we proceed any further, I want to thank the publishing team at Reformation Trust for their commitment to this Long Line of Godly Men Profiles series. I remain thankful for the ongoing influence of my former professor and current friend, Dr. R.C. Sproul. I must also express my gratitude to Chris Larson, who is so instrumental in overseeing this series.

Moreover, I am indebted to Christ Fellowship Baptist Church of Mobile, Ala., which I have served as senior pastor for more than eleven years. No pastor has ever been given as much encouragement to serve Christ on such a far-reaching scale as I have. I am extremely grateful for the support of my fellow elders and congregation, who have continuously encouraged me in my extended ministry abroad.

I want to express my gratitude for my executive ministry assistant, Kay Allen, who typed this document, and Dustin Benge, a fellow pastor at Christ Fellowship, who helped prepare this manuscript.

I thank God for my family who support me in my life

THE DARING MISSION OF WILLIAM TYNDALE

and ministry. My wife, Anne, and our four children, Andrew, James, Grace Anne, and John, remain pillars of strength for me.

—Steven J. Lawson

Dallas

July 2014

A Dangerous Passion

The only true reformation is that which emanates from the Word of God. The Holy Scriptures, by bearing witness to the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, create in man by the Holy Ghost a faith which justifies him.¹

—J.H. MERLE D'AUBIGNÉ

William Tyndale, by translating the Bible from the Greek and Hebrew, became the “true father of the English Bible”² and launched a global influence for the spread of God’s Word, extending to the present day. He likewise became the father of the English Reformation, as well as the father of the Modern English language. This monumental task of rendering the Bible from its original tongues gave rise to the Protestant

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1. J.H. Merle d’Aubigné, *The Reformation in England* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1853, 1994), 1:167.
 2. Sir Frederick Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts: Being a History of the Text and Its Translations* (Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger, 2007), 211, 217.

movement in England and effected the standardization of the language of Modern English. Simply put, Tyndale helped launch the English Reformation by giving the people of England a pure translation of Scripture in their native tongue.

Tyndale was a daring pioneer who blazed the trail for the Reformation in his homeland. Noted Reformation historian J.H. Merle d'Aubigné calls Tyndale “the mighty mainspring of the English Reformation.”³ That is to say, Tyndale set into motion the spread of the Reformation throughout England and beyond. Preeminent among Bible translators, Tyndale possessed “a linguistic genius whose expertise in multiple languages dazzled the scholarly world of his day.”⁴ According to Tyndale biographer Brian Edwards, Tyndale was “the heart of the Reformation in England.” In fact, Edwards further exclaims, Tyndale “*was* the Reformation in England.”⁵

These respected men are not alone in their accolades for Tyndale. The famous martyrologist John Foxe lauded Tyndale as “the Apostle of England . . . the most remarkable figure among the first generation of English Protestants.”⁶ Through his translation work, Tyndale is regarded as “the first of the Puritans, or at least their grandfather.”⁷ He became the driving

3. D'Aubigné, *The Reformation in England*, 1:167.

4. Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2002), 48.

5. Brian H. Edwards, *God's Outlaw: The Story of William Tyndale and the English Bible* (Darlington, England: Evangelical, 1976, 1999), 170. Italics original.

6. John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 114.

7. Robert Sheehan, “William Tyndale's Legacy,” *The Banner of Truth* 24, no. 557, February 2010, 24.

force that reshaped and reconfigured the English language. Translating the Bible into accessible English for the common person, Tyndale is celebrated as the “prophet of the English language.”⁸ Tyndale took supreme command of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures and placed them into the hands of ordinary people in a readable English Bible.

With such lofty praise attached to Tyndale, certain questions need to be addressed for his place in the broader scope of church history to be fully appreciated. What steps did this chief architect of the English Bible take in order to produce his magnificent translation from the original languages? What challenges did he have to overcome in order to present this extraordinary gift to the English-speaking world? What high price did Tyndale ultimately pay in order to accomplish this extraordinary feat?

Before addressing these pertinent questions, we first want to address William Tyndale the man. Who was this luminous figure? What was the larger narrative of his life? Where did he carry out this history-altering task? It is to these questions that we will first devote ourselves.

EARLY LIFE AND STUDIES

William Tyndale was born in the early 1490s, probably between 1493 and 1495, most likely in 1494. His family lived in rural western England, in the Slymbridge area of Gloucestershire near the Welsh border and Severn River. During the

8. *Ibid.*, 29.

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Wars of the Roses in the fifteenth century, Tyndale's ancestors migrated to the Gloucestershire area and became landowners. Tyndale was placed by God into a industrious family of respectable farmers who made their livelihood by cultivating their land. The Tyndale family was reasonably successful, flourishing in one of the most prosperous counties in England. This relative prosperity allowed William's parents to send him to Oxford, England's most prestigious university.

Little is known about William's younger years, which remain shrouded in obscurity. What is known, however, is that Tyndale had at least two brothers, Edward and John. Like their father, his brother John became an able and successful land manager who oversaw their Gloucestershire farm. The other brother, Edward, became a crown steward in Gloucestershire, who received rent for the use of Berkeley land for the king. In future years, William would exert a direct influence upon his brothers for the cause of the Reformation in England. As a result, John would be fined for possessing and distributing Bibles, a serious crime at the time in England. Upon his death, Edward would leave a number of Reformed books in his last will and testament.

In 1506, at age 12, William entered Magdalen Hall, which was located inside Magdalen College and attached to Oxford University. He spent ten years, from 1506 to 1516, studying at Oxford.⁹ In Magdalen Hall, Tyndale spent the first

9. David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), 38.

two years in the equivalence of a preparatory grammar school. There he studied grammar, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music theory, rhetoric, logic, and philosophy. Upon entering Oxford, he demonstrated great aptitude and progress in languages under the finest classical scholars. While there, Tyndale was ordained into the priesthood, though he never entered a monastic order.

After graduating with a bachelor of arts on July 4, 1512, Tyndale set his sights on a master's degree from Oxford. It was not until the late stage of his education, after eight or nine years, that he finally was allowed to study theology. However, it was only speculative theology, with priority given to Aristotle and other Greek philosophers rather than the Bible. Upon reflection, Tyndale expressed his great disappointment with being shielded from the Bible and theology:

In the universities, they have ordained that no man shall look on the Scripture until he be noselled [nursed] in heathen learning eight or nine years, and armed with false principles with which he is clean shut out of the understanding of the Scripture. . . . [T]he Scripture is locked up with . . . false expositions, and with false principles of natural philosophy.¹⁰

Such a spiritually impoverished education hindered Tyndale

10. William Tyndale, "The Practice of Prelates," *The Works of William Tyndale* (1849 and 1850; repr., Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 2010), 2:291.

from knowing the truth of Scripture. In July 1515, Tyndale graduated with a master of arts as a university-trained linguist from the highly acclaimed Oxford University. Little is known about what Tyndale chose to do immediately afterward. There is consensus that he likely pursued further studies at Oxford and gave classroom instruction there.

In 1519, Tyndale went to study at Cambridge, regarded as “Oxford’s foremost intellectual rival in England.”¹¹ Scholars suggest that he may have received a degree while there.¹² Prior to Tyndale’s arrival, the famed Dutch Renaissance humanist Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) lectured in Greek at Cambridge from 1511 to 1514. During Tyndale’s time there, Erasmus was traveling around Europe, compiling his famous Greek New Testament.

Cambridge had become a hotbed for the Protestant teaching of the German Reformer Martin Luther. Many of Luther’s works were accessible at Cambridge, being broadly circulated among instructors and students alike. This exposure generated a building excitement on campus as these truths captivated many brilliant minds. As such, Cambridge was becoming the training ground for future reformers and martyrs. Under this influence of the Bible, Tyndale embraced a deep commitment to the core truths of the Protestant movement.

In 1520, a small group of Cambridge scholars began

11. Alister E. McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 68.

12. Daniell writes that the time Tyndale spent at Cambridge may have been “short or longer, between 1517 and 1521.” *William Tyndale*, 49.

A DANGEROUS PASSION

meeting regularly to discuss this new theology. A mere three years earlier, Luther had posted his Ninety-Five Theses in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517. These truth-seeking students gathered at a local pub on the campus of King's College, called the White Horse Inn, to debate the ideas of Luther. This group became known as "Little Germany." In this small circle were many future leaders in the Reformed movement in England. These included Robert Barnes, Nicholas Ridley, Hugh Latimer, Miles Coverdale, Thomas Cranmer, Thomas Bilney, and, many believe, William Tyndale.¹³ Of this group, two became archbishops, seven became bishops, and eight would be Protestant martyrs—Bilney, Tyndale, Clark, Frith, Lambert, Barnes, Ridley, and Latimer. These informal gatherings became the kindling for the English Reformation that would soon spread like wildfire across the British Isles.

BIRTHING A VISION

In 1521, Tyndale came to the conclusion that he needed to step away from the academic atmosphere in order to give more careful thought to the truths of the Reformation. Specifically, this young scholar wanted time to study and digest the Greek New Testament. He took a job in Gloucestershire, less than twelve miles from his birthplace, working for the

13. Some historians, including Brian H. Edwards and S.M. Houghton, assert that William Tyndale was in all probability at the White Horse Inn. Others, like Daniell, think Tyndale was not present.

wealthy family of Sir John Walsh at their estate, Little Sodbury. Tyndale served as the primary tutor for the children, private chaplain for the family, and personal secretary to Sir John. During this period, he preached regularly to a little congregation in nearby St. Adeline.

In considering the spiritual state of England, Tyndale came to the sober realization that England would never be evangelized using Latin Bibles. He concluded, "It was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the Scripture were laid before their eyes in their mother tongue."¹⁴ As he traveled throughout the region, fulfilling opportunities to preach, his beliefs were becoming well known as being distinctly Luther-like. His convictions became so strong that he found himself in disputes with officials in the Roman Catholic Church over the nature of the true gospel. Around 1522, Tyndale was called before John Bell, the chancellor of Worcester, and warned about his controversial views. No formal charges were leveled against him at the time, but this conflict was a foretaste of what was to come.

As local priests came to dine at the Walsh manor, Tyndale witnessed firsthand the appalling biblical ignorance of the Roman church. During one meal, he found himself in a heated debate with a Catholic clergyman. The priest asserted,

14. William Tyndale, "The Preface of Master William Tyndale, That He Made Before the Five Books of Moses, Called Genesis," in *The Works of William Tyndale* (1848; repr., Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 2010), 394.

“We had better be without God’s law than the pope’s.”¹⁵ Tyndale boldly responded, “I defy the pope and all his laws.” He then added that “if God spared him life, ere many years he would cause a boy that drives the plough to know more of the Scripture than he does.”¹⁶ Tyndale was echoing Erasmus’ words in the preface to his recently published Greek New Testament: “I would to God that the plowman would sing a text of the Scripture at his plow and that the weaver would hum them to the tune of his shuttle.”¹⁷ From this point forward, the ambitious task of translating the Bible into English was the dominating pursuit of his life.

Tyndale traveled to London in 1523 to seek official authorization for a sanctioned translation and publication of an English Bible. He arranged a meeting with the bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, a scholarly man and well-known classicist who had worked with Erasmus on the latter’s Greek New Testament. Because of this association with Erasmus, Tyndale presumed Tunstall would be open to his translation project. Instead, Tyndale met great resistance to the idea of an English translation. Tunstall became highly suspicious of Tyndale’s theology, which he feared would spread Luther’s Protestant doctrines and lead to an upheaval in England such as was occurring in Germany. Luther’s newly translated

15. *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, 1:77.

16. “Biographical Notice of William Tyndale,” in *Works*, 1:xix.

17. Erasmus as quoted in Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (1858; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 6:724.

German Bible, released in September 1522, had thrown the region of Saxony into turmoil. Tunstall believed that a Bible in English, accessible to the people, would produce much the same mayhem in England, and so he stonewalled Tyndale.

But this tactic only deepened Tyndale's convictions that England desperately needed a Bible that the common man could read. The only question was how or where it could be done.

While in London, Tyndale preached numerous times at St. Dunstan's Church. One day, a wealthy cloth merchant named Humphrey Monmouth heard Tyndale preach at St. Dunstan's and decided to underwrite his expenses. This benefactor allowed Tyndale to remain in London for one year as he developed a plan for his Bible translation.

That plan involved a radical move. If Tyndale was to accomplish his daring mission, he realized, "There was no place to do it in all England."¹⁸ Opposed by both the English church and crown, Tyndale realized he must leave the country and undertake his epic work elsewhere.

In the spring of 1524, at age 30, Tyndale sailed to the European Continent to launch his translation and publishing endeavor. He would do so without the king of England's consent, a clear breach of the established law. As a result, every biblical text he translated, he translated illegally. When he departed his native shores, Tyndale lived in exile for the remainder of his life. Never again would he return to his beloved

18. *Works*, 1:xxii.

homeland. For the next twelve years, Tyndale would live on foreign soil as a fugitive and outlaw of the English crown.

THE WORK BEGINS

Arriving first in Hamburg, Germany, in 1524, Tyndale soon journeyed to Wittenberg to sit under the great German Reformer Martin Luther. He may have done so incognito. British scholar Tony Lane writes:

It appears that he first went to Wittenberg to study. Contemporaries such as Thomas More refer to his time there. There is also an entry in the matriculation register for 27 May 1524 reading ‘Guillelmus Daltici Ex Angelia.’ If the final ‘ci’ is a copyist’s error for ‘n’ we have an anagram of ‘Tindal’ with the two syllables reversed.¹⁹

If this is, indeed, the name William Tyndale listed on the matriculation register in Wittenberg, he would have met Luther. This encounter would have come at a time when the German Reformer had thrown off the last vestiges of popish allegiance.²⁰ Such an influence upon Tyndale would have been significant.

19. A.N.S. Lane, “William Tyndale,” in *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*, ed. Timothy Larsen (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 678.

20. John McClintock and James Strong, eds., *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, vol. 10 (1867–87; repr., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 1981), s.v. “William Tyndale.”

THE DARING MISSION OF WILLIAM TYNDALE

While in Wittenberg, Tyndale began the work of translating the New Testament from Greek into English. It appears he undertook a major portion of this work from May to July 1525. The impact of Philip Melanchthon, a master of the Greek language, would have also been invaluable.

Accompanied by his amanuensis, Tyndale traveled to Cologne, the most populous city in Germany, in August 1525, where he completed his translation of the New Testament. In this bustling city, it was easy for the two Englishmen to be lost in the shuffle. Here, Tyndale found a printer, Peter Quentell, who agreed to print his new translation. However, the secrecy of the printing was breached when one of the print workers came under the influence of wine and spoke openly of the clandestine endeavor. John Cochlaeus, a bitter opponent of the Reformation, overheard talk of this forbidden project and immediately arranged for a raid on the print shop. Tyndale was forewarned and quickly gathered the few printed leaves along with the rest of his unprinted New Testament translation, escaping under the cover of night.

Fleeing down the Rhine River, Tyndale arrived in the more Protestant-friendly city of Worms in 1526. This was the very city where Luther had stood trial for heresy a mere five years before. Luther's teachings had exerted a strong influence on the city, making it sympathetic to the Protestant cause. Tyndale again found a printer, Peter Schoeffer, willing to publish his work.

Tyndale's New Testament was the first to be translated

from the original Greek into English. Further, it was the first English Bible to be mechanically printed. Previously, there were only a few handwritten copies of John Wycliffe's Bible in English, translated a century and a half earlier. But Wycliffe's rendering was loosely translated from Latin, not Greek. Tyndale's work was far superior. Schoeffer completed the initial print run by producing some three thousand copies. Over the next eight years, two additional revised editions of Tyndale's New Testament would follow, as well as several pirated editions published by unauthorized printers.

Ready for delivery in the spring of 1526, Tyndale shipped his Bibles, hidden in bales of cotton, along the international trade routes to England. German Lutheran cloth merchants in England received the disguised shipment, ready to distribute the Bibles. Once past the royal agents, these forbidden books were picked up by a secret Protestant society, the Christian Brethren, and taken throughout England to various cities, universities, and monasteries. The newly printed Bibles were sold to eager Englishmen—merchants, students, tailors, weavers, bricklayers, and peasants alike—all hungry to read and grow in their knowledge of God's Word. Each New Testament cost three shillings and two pence, a week's wages for a skilled laborer—a remarkably affordable price for the average person.

By the summer of 1526, church officials in England had discovered this underground circulation of Tyndale's Bible. The archbishop of Canterbury and the bishop of London were enraged, and they confiscated every Tyndale Bible they could

find. Church officials immediately declared the purchase, sale, distribution, or possession of this Bible a serious crime that would result in severe punishment. At St. Paul's Cross in London, Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall preached a scathing sermon against the Tyndale Bible and ceremonially burned copies of this unlawful volume. This demonstration sounded a public warning, though it hardly squelched the desire of the people to gain access to the Word of God in their own language.

OPPOSITION AND OBSTACLES

Tyndale's opponents in May 1527 hatched an ingenious plan to stop the spread of the unauthorized Bibles. William Warham, the archbishop of Canterbury, conspired to purchase the remaining copies of the Bible in order to destroy them. At first, this diabolical plot seemed brilliant. But it quickly backfired as the money from the sales provided the needed resources for Tyndale to then produce a revised second edition of his work. What Warham meant for evil, God meant for good. This allowed an even better version to be produced, with a larger print run.

Tyndale published his first major theological work, *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, in May 1528. This treatise focused on the very heart of the gospel, namely, justification by faith alone in Christ alone. Tyndale proclaimed that faith alone saves, and true faith produces a living obedience to God's Word. This significant work drew heavily upon Luther's

works on this same subject. In places, Tyndale's writings are merely a translation or paraphrase of the German Reformer's own words. As hostility toward Tyndale grew, he disguised his location by having the name of a nonexistent printer—Hans Luft—printed on the title page, along with a false place of publication—Marburg, Germany. In reality, this important doctrinal work was printed by John Hoochstraten in the city of Antwerp.

Tyndale's opponents soon implemented a more aggressive plan to stop Tyndale. On June 18, 1528, an English cardinal, Thomas Wolsey, dispatched three agents to the Continent to search for Tyndale. Wolsey also ordered John Hacket, English ambassador to the Low Countries (modern-day Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg), to demand that the regent authorize the arrest of Tyndale. A manhunt was launched for this notorious enemy of the state, and anyone who assisted him was to be punished. Still, all attempts to catch this elusive Reformer were unproductive, as he shrewdly withdrew to Marburg for safety. Hacket reported back to England that Tyndale was nowhere to be found.

While in Marburg, Tyndale penned a second title, *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528). Tyndale called upon every Christian to submit to every authority, including kings and magistrates. The existing hierarchy of the Catholic Church in England, he further claimed, possessed no real spiritual authority. When King Henry VIII read this work, he immediately approved its message, commenting, "This

book is for me and all kings to read!”²¹ Apart from his New Testament translation, *The Obedience of a Christian Man* is Tyndale’s most influential work.

In September 1528, Tyndale’s opponents made yet another serious attempt to track him down. A friar named John West was dispatched from England to the European Continent to find, seize, and bring this runaway Reformer back to England. West arrived in Antwerp, dressed in civilian attire, and began scouring cities and interrogating printers, searching for the stealthy translator. At the same time, Hermann Rinck, a Cologne senator, was buying and destroying all the Tyndale Bibles he could locate. Sensing the pressure, Tyndale remained undercover in Marburg, improving his ability in Hebrew, a language unknown in England. With this new skill in hand, Tyndale immediately set out to translate the Hebrew Old Testament into English, while continuing a careful revision of his New Testament.

To conceal his whereabouts, Tyndale shifted his location in 1529 from Marburg to Antwerp, then part of the Holy Roman Empire and now in modern-day Belgium. This thriving metropolis offered him access to capable printers, fellowship with reform-minded Englishmen, and a more direct shipping route to England. Here, Tyndale completed his translation of the five books of Moses.

With a new manhunt under way, Tyndale concluded that

21. Robert Demaus and Richard Lovett, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1886), 205.

the danger was too great to remain in this large city. Realizing the Pentateuch must be printed elsewhere, he boarded a ship in Antwerp, sailing to the mouth of the Elbe River in Germany. His plan was then to venture south to Hamburg. However, the voyage was halted by a severe storm, causing shipwreck off the coast of the Low Countries. Tragically, all his books, writings, and translation of the Pentateuch were lost. With unwavering determination, Tyndale was forced to undertake this enormous translation task yet again.

After enduring this devastating loss, Tyndale finally arrived in Hamburg. He was received into the house of the von Emerson family, who were strongly sympathetic to the cause of the Reformation. While there, Tyndale was reunited with Miles Coverdale, a Cambridge classmate. Coverdale would eventually complete his own translation of the Bible into English, though not from the original languages, and publish it in 1535 in what is known as the Coverdale Bible. In this cloistered environment, Tyndale undertook the laborious task of retranslating the Pentateuch from Hebrew into English. This arduous work, with Coverdale's assistance, took him from March to December 1529.

That same year, Sir Thomas More, the king's devout and intelligent lord chancellor, was commissioned by the king and the church in England to launch a character assassination upon Tyndale. The attack escalated with the publishing of *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, a vicious work in which More assaulted Tyndale, labeling him "the captain of English heretics," "a

hell-hound in the kennel of the devil,” “a new Judas,” “worse than Sodom and Gomorrah,” “an idolater and devil-worshipper,” and “a beast out of whose brutish beastly mouth cometh a filthy foam.”²² More, a staunch enemy of the Reformation, maintained that the Roman Catholic Church is the only true church. Whoever opposes the infallible teaching of Rome, he pronounced, is a heretic. This was a shot fired across Tyndale’s bow. The English Reformer, by contrast, contended that trust must be placed in Scripture alone, not in the church. Anything short of this, Tyndale insisted, is of the spirit of antichrist.

Undeterred by the resistance from his homeland, Tyndale published the five books of Moses in January 1530 in Antwerp. Hoochstraten printed this small volume under the publishing pseudonym *Hans Luft at Marburg*. Like Tyndale’s New Testament several years before, these books were smuggled into England and distributed. Tyndale’s plans remained ambitious: to complete the translation of the entire Old Testament.

In late 1530, *The Practice of Prelates* appeared from the Reformer’s pen. This work was a strong polemic against the Catholic clergy, documenting the corrupt relationship between the English crown and the papacy. As a result, this book transformed King Henry VIII into an avowed enemy of Tyndale.

Still another strategy was launched to apprehend Tyndale. In November 1530, Thomas Cromwell, an adviser to King Henry VIII, commissioned Stephen Vaughan, an English

22. Thomas More, cited in N.R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power, Part 3: Renaissance and Reformation* (London: Grace, 2004), 381.

merchant sympathetic to the Reformed cause, to find Tyndale. Vaughan was instructed to offer Tyndale a salary and safe passage back to England. Upon his arrival on the Continent, Vaughan dispatched three letters to Tyndale, each addressed to three different cities—Frankfurt, Hamburg, and Marburg. Surprisingly, he received a response from Tyndale. As a result, a series of secret meetings were arranged in Antwerp in April 1531.

Vaughan attempted to persuade Tyndale to return to England. The tenacious translator agreed to return to England, but only on one condition. The king must choose someone else to translate the Bible into English. If Henry agreed, Tyndale would return to England, cease his translation work, and offer his life in service to the king. Similar promises of safety had been made earlier to John Hus and Luther but were broken. Tyndale knew the king's promise would not be kept.

Vaughan wrote from Antwerp on June 19 these simple words: "I find him [Tyndale] always singing one note."²³ In other words, Tyndale refused to change his tune. He would not promise to cease writing books or return to England until the king commissioned a Bible in the English language. Vaughan returned to England empty-handed. Tyndale was undaunted in his mission and could not be diverted from fulfilling this singular passion of his heart. In defiance of the English throne, he chose to continue his daring pursuit.

With attempts to apprehend Tyndale failing, Cromwell

23. Daniell, *William Tyndale*, 217.

devised an even more aggressive strategy. Sir Thomas Elyot, a new emissary, was dispatched to Europe to apprehend Tyndale. His marching orders were to find Tyndale and bring him to the king, whatever it took. Elyot searched high and low, but his concerted effort yielded no positive results. Elyot returned to England without the despised renegade.

In 1531, Tyndale issued a treatise in response to the attacks in More's *Dialogue*, released in 1529. It was titled *Answer*; in it, he exegetically defended his translation of selected biblical passages that More claimed would lead people away from Roman Catholic theology and practice. Tyndale contended that Scripture was clear enough to be understood without church leadership imposing its twisted, man-made tradition. More countered in 1532 and 1533 with his six-volume work *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*. At nearly half a million words, the *Confutation* was the most imposing of More's polemical works, written as an imaginary dialogue between More and Tyndale with More addressing each of Tyndale's criticisms of Catholic rites and doctrines. These weighty tomes alleged that Tyndale was a traitor to England and a heretic. Despite More's vicious attack upon Tyndale, the Reformed cause was spreading across Europe and now England.

BETRAYED, IMPRISONED,
AND CONDEMNED

In the early months of 1534, Tyndale moved into a house of

English merchants in Antwerp as the guest of Thomas Poyntz, a wealthy English merchant. Sympathetic to the Reformed cause, Poyntz was “a good shrewd friend and loyal sympathizer.”²⁴ He placed Tyndale under his protection, even providing a stipend as Tyndale worked on his translation project and other writings. The chaplain of this English house was a man named John Rogers. Through Tyndale’s instruction and influence, Rogers became a loyal supporter of Reformed doctrines. Eventually, Rogers would compile his own English Bible in 1537, known as the Matthew Bible. This famous edition contained Tyndale’s New Testament, Pentateuch, Historical Books, and Jonah, with minor changes. The rest of the Old Testament was drawn from the Coverdale Bible. In 1555, Rogers would become the first Protestant martyr under Queen Mary I, also known as “Bloody Mary.”

Feeling more secure, Tyndale set himself to work on the revision of his New Testament translation, which has been called “the glory of his life’s work.”²⁵ This second edition appeared in 1534, eight years after the first. It contains some four thousand changes to the 1526 edition, though some claim it has as many as five thousand edits. These numerous corrections were the result of his further study of the original language and of feedback he received. A short prologue was placed before each New Testament book except Acts and Revelation. In addition, Tyndale added cross-references and

24. *Ibid.*, 361.

25. *Ibid.*, 316.

explanatory notes to the biblical text in the outside margin, and marked off the literary units of each book on the inside margin. All six thousand printed copies of Tyndale's revised second edition of the New Testament sold out within a month.

A third edition would follow in December 1534 and early 1535, but with significantly fewer corrections. By this time, Tyndale's mastery of Hebrew was as advanced as his knowledge of Greek. This afforded him the ability to translate the next section of the Old Testament, Joshua through 2 Chronicles. This season of Tyndale's life proved to be extremely prolific. But all was about to change.

In England, a man named Henry Phillips found himself in a disastrous situation after gambling away a large sum of money his father had given him to pay a debt. A high official in the church, possibly the bishop of London, John Stokesley, became aware of his desperate plight. Phillips was viewed as a perfect accomplice for another devious strategy to arrest Tyndale. He was offered a large sum of money to travel to Europe and locate Tyndale. Like Judas, Phillips took the offer.

Phillips arrived in Antwerp in early summer of 1535. He made the necessary contacts among English merchants and followed the trail that led him straight to Tyndale. Phillips diabolically established a sham friendship with Tyndale. Despite the warning of Poyntz, Phillips secured Tyndale's trust and lured him into a narrow alley, where soldiers waited to arrest him.

After twelve years as a fugitive, the elusive Tyndale was at last apprehended and taken into custody. Upon his arrest, the bulky manuscript of his most recent translation work, Joshua to 2 Chronicles, escaped confiscation. It was likely Rogers, his close friend and companion, who gathered it up for safe possession. Rogers later took up Tyndale's cause and had his final work printed in the Matthew Bible.

Upon his capture, Tyndale was imprisoned six miles north of Brussels in the castle of Vilvoorde. With an imposing moat, seven towers, three drawbridges, and impenetrable walls, the castle was a fortress of confinement. Shivering in the cold, damp dungeons of this castle-prison, Tyndale waited more than a year for his trial, which was a mockery of justice. During his five-hundred-day confinement, Tyndale wrote another treatise, *Faith Alone Justifies before God*. To the end, Tyndale defended the seminal truth that lay behind his imprisonment.

During the harsh winter of 1535, Tyndale wrote in a final letter: "I suffer greatly from cold in the head, and am afflicted by a perpetual catarrh [discharge], which is much increase in this cell. . . . My overcoat is worn out; my shirts are also worn out." He requested "a lamp in the evening; it is indeed wearisome sitting alone in the dark. But most of all I beg and beseech your clemency to be urgent with the commissary . . . permit me to have my Hebrew Bible, Hebrew Grammar, and

Hebrew Dictionary, that I may pass the time in that study.”²⁶ These months were “a long dying leading to dying.”²⁷ The martyrologist John Foxe wrote that as Tyndale sat in prison, he “was affecting his very . . . enemies” as “he converted his keeper, the keeper’s daughter, and others of his household.”²⁸ Though cold and suffering within the bowels of this stone prison, like the Apostle Paul in his Roman prison, Tyndale’s heart was still ablaze with gospel truth and undeniable joy.

In August 1536, Tyndale stood trial before his accusers, who leveled a long list of charges against him. Among his offenses, Tyndale asserted that justification is by faith alone, human traditions cannot bind the conscience, the human will is bound by sin, there is no purgatory, neither Mary nor the saints offer prayers for us, and we are not to pray to them. All this made Tyndale an enemy of both church and state. He was condemned as a heretic.

During a public service, Tyndale would have been excommunicated and stripped of his priesthood. According to the custom for such ceremonies, Tyndale emerged before a large gathering wearing his priestly robes. He was forced to kneel, as his hands would be scraped with a knife or sharp glass, symbolizing the loss of all privileges of the priesthood. The

26. William Tyndale, introduction to *Tyndale’s New Testament*, ed. and with an introduction by David Daniell (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), ix.

27. John Piper, *Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ: The Cost of Bringing the Gospel to the Nations in the Lives of William Tyndale, Adoniram Judson, and John Paton* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2009), 50.

28. Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, 127.

bread and wine of the Mass would be placed into his hands and then removed. He would be stripped of his vestments and re clothed as a layman. He would then be delivered over to the civil authorities for the inevitable sentence to death. Forced back into his dungeon cell, a steady stream of priests and monks came to harass him and seek a recanting.

‘LORD, OPEN THE KING’S EYES’

On October 6, 1536, Tyndale emerged from the castle and was paraded to the southern gate of the town, where his execution stake awaited. A large crowd assembled behind a barricade. In the middle of a circular space, two great beams were raised in the familiar form of a cross. Hanging from the top of the central beam was a strong iron chain. Brushwood, straw, and logs were bundled and piled at its base. Amid pomp and pharisaical splendor, the procurer-general and the great doctors took their seats as spectators. The massive crowd parted, allowing the guards to bring Tyndale closer to his execution.

Tyndale proceeded to the cross. The guards bound his feet to the bottom of the cross as the chain was fastened around his neck, pulling him tightly to the beam of wood. The wood was rearranged around the prisoner to encase him in combustible material. Gunpowder was sprinkled thoroughly on the brush. The executioner stood behind the cross, awaiting the signal from the procurer-general to carry out the sentence. It was

likely at this moment that Tyndale gazed into the heavens and cried forth in prayer, “Lord, open the king of England’s eyes.”²⁹

The procurer-general gave the signal and the executioner quickly tightened the iron noose, strangling Tyndale. The crowd watched Tyndale gasp for air as he suffocated and died. However, his mere death did not satisfy. The procurer-general grabbed a lighted wax torch and handed it to the executioner, who threw it on the straw and brushwood. The blazing fire caused the gunpowder to explode, blowing up the corpse. What remained of the limply hanging, burnt body of Tyndale fell into the raging fire.³⁰

God ultimately answered Tyndale’s dying prayer. In the year he was martyred, 1536, a complete English Bible was already circulating in England, unknown to Tyndale. This work was predominately drawn from Tyndale’s own translation. The first of these Bibles was the Coverdale Bible, printed in 1535. A second English translation of the entire Bible would come as a result of the efforts of John Rogers in 1537. This version was known as the Matthew Bible.

Less than a year after Tyndale’s death, Thomas Cranmer, who had become the archbishop of Canterbury, and Oliver Cromwell persuaded Henry VIII to approve the publication of an official English Bible. When King Henry saw the Coverdale Bible, he emphatically proclaimed, “If there be no heresies in it,

29. *Ibid.*, 83.

30. This scene has been reconstructed by David Daniell from other similar capital punishments at the time of Tyndale. Daniell, *William Tyndale*, 383.

then let it be spread abroad among all the people!”³¹ In September 1538, the king issued a decree that a copy of the Bible in English and Latin should be placed in every church in England. The permissible copies of the Bible were the Coverdale Bible and the Matthew Bible, both flowing, in large measure, from the influence and pen of William Tyndale. In 1539, Coverdale issued a revised version of his translation called the Great Bible (so named for its large size), which received popular acclaim and the official approval of the king.

The historian J.H. Merle d’Aubigné writes that after Tyndale’s death, the stream of English Bibles into England was “like a mighty river continually bearing new waters to the sea.”³² As these printed English Bibles became accessible to the common man in England, Tyndale’s plowman was, at last, reading, discussing, living, and proclaiming the truths of the Bible among his relatives, friends, and countrymen.

Almost five hundred years later, the river of Scripture continues to flow mightily across the face of the globe. Tyndale’s translation and those based on it formed the basis of the King James Version in 1611, and through it, nearly every English translation since. Today, English translations are numerous, yet they have their singular origin in Tyndale’s foundational work. Publishers of English Bibles continue to stand upon the

31. William J. McRae, *A Book to Die For: A Practical Study Guide on How Our Bible Came to Us* (Toronto: Clements, 2002), xiv, cited in Tony Lane, “A Man for All People: Introducing William Tyndale,” *Christian History* 6, no. 4 (1987), 6–9.

32. J.H. Merle d’Aubigné, *The Reformation in England* (1866–78; repr., Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1994), 2:348.

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sturdy shoulders of Tyndale's pioneering efforts. Given that English is an international language, the ongoing influence of William Tyndale extends to the farthest corners of the world.

As the current of truth surges forth in this present hour, may the truths of God's Word inundate our hearts and the swells of sovereign grace flood over our minds. May there be a renewed commitment to the sufficiency and exclusivity of this bloodstained Book.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Steven J. Lawson is president of OnePassion Ministries, a ministry designed to bring about biblical reformation in the church today, and former senior pastor of Christ Fellowship Baptist Church in Mobile, Alabama. He served as a pastor for thirty-four years, having previously served in Arkansas and Alabama. He is a graduate of Texas Tech University (B.B.A.), Dallas Theological Seminary (Th.M.), and Reformed Theological Seminary (D.Min.).

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Dr. Lawson's pulpit ministry takes him around the world, including Russia, Ukraine, Wales, England, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, New Zealand, Japan, and to many conferences in the United States, including The Shepherd's Conference and Resolved at Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California.

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Dr. Lawson and his wife, Anne, have three sons, Andrew, James, and John, and a daughter, Grace Anne.