

# GREAT RESOLUTIONS

Program Eighteen

## The Man Behind the First English Bible Part Three on the Life of John Wycliffe

### Introduction

In the midst of corruption and all manner of superstition stood a brother with the conviction that only the light of the Scriptures could usher people out of the darkness of the Middle Ages. John Wycliffe, himself captured by the Lord and His Word, came to desire that all men's consciences would come under the same authority.

### England in the Middle Ages

Life was hard for most of the people in fourteenth century England. England, along with much of Europe, had been decimated by the plague. The Hundred Years' War between England and France, and feudal wars and peasant revolts, also ravaged the country. Many people were grindingly poor; few could read or write. People had little knowledge of sanitation and proper health practices; life expectancy was short – most people did not reach their forties.

Spiritually, things were not much better. The Catholic church exerted an enormous influence over the people. For the most part, that influence was not positive. Greed, lust and a desire for power characterized the clergy. Falsehood and superstition were prevalent, and fear and ignorance held people in bondage.

The darkness and degradation of the church was due in large part to the fact that the Bible was virtually a locked book in England at this time. The church maintained that only the clergy could be entrusted with the Scriptures. Thus, it sought to "protect" the Scriptures from ignorant and common people who (according to some), would not know what to do with it. The Council of Toulouse (1229) had strongly decreed: "We forbid the laity to possess any of the books of the Old and New Testaments. . . having any of these books translated into the vulgar [common] tongue we strictly forbid." Some

were even condemned for simply hearing the Word read in their mother-tongue.

John Wycliffe, as a theologian and Latin scholar, was one who did have access to the Scriptures. The more he read and studied the Scriptures, the more he realized the contrast between the light in the Scriptures and the darkness around him.

Wycliffe came to espouse what some considered as radical beliefs: that the Bible is the Word of God; that God and His Word are one; that Christ is the author of the Scriptures, that only the Scriptures are infallible, and that men are not; that traditions, doctrines, or ordinances should not be placed above Scripture; and that Scripture should be interpreted by Scripture. At this time, most people only had opportunity to hear portions of the Scriptures read at mass. Often, most often, even this would be in Latin. Wycliffe became burdened that the English people would be able to read and study the Word in their own language. Wycliffe agreed with Jerome of the fourth century, who believed that "to be ignorant of the scriptures was to be ignorant of Christ." In answer to the argument that the people were too ignorant to have the Scriptures Wycliffe wrote, "No man is so rude a scholar but that he might learn the words of the Gospel according to his simplicity." He also declared that "as the Bible contains Christ, that is all that is necessary for all men, not for priests alone."

**To be ignorant of the scriptures was to be ignorant of Christ.**

### Wycliffe's Burden

Up to this point, only portions of the Scripture had been translated into the English language. Wycliffe became burdened that the entire Bible would be translated into

English and would be made accessible to all the people.

In order to have the divine truths released, they need to be translated into the language of the people. Wycliffe stated, “Englishmen learn Christ’s law best in English. Moses heard God’s law in his own tongue; so did Christ’s apostles.”

Even the Scriptures quoted by the Lord Jesus in His speaking to the people were from the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that was completed about 300 years before Christ was born. The best translations are those which are based upon Hebrew and Greek, the original languages of the Old and New Testaments. Wycliffe, however, did not know these languages; he was a scholar of Latin. Therefore, he planned a translation from the Latin Vulgate. In the last years of his life, he and his coworkers, ignoring the decree of the Council of Toulouse, began a profoundly important work: the translation of the entire Bible into English. This – a Bible in their own language – was to become a precious gift to the people of England. It would also open the way for similar translations later in the Reformation.

The quiet rural area of Lutterworth was where Wycliffe’s and his co-workers worked. Here Wycliffe was relieved of his responsibilities at the university, and he and his co-workers

faithfully labored. They completed their task in approximately two years, around 1382. John Purvey, Wycliffe’s close friend and associate, later revised the initial version, but Wycliffe is still considered primarily responsible for this undertaking.



### Rejection and Persecution

Making the Bible available in the English language was a daring endeavor. The church bitterly opposed this work, saying “By this translation, the Scriptures have become vulgar, and they are more available to lay, and even to women who can read, than they

were to learned scholars, who have a high intelligence. So the pearl of the gospel is scattered and trodden underfoot by swine.”

The archbishop called John Wycliffe a child of the devil and a pupil of Anti-Christ and said that Wycliffe “crowned his wickedness” by translating the Scriptures into the mother tongue.

Wycliffe considered this kind of speaking a blaspheming of the Holy Spirit who first made the Word of God known to men of various nations in all their mother-tongues. Surely, the enemy Satan was trying to thwart faith that would come to men by hearing the Word as mentioned in Romans 10:17.

Wycliffe said, “If it is heresy to read the Bible, then the Holy Ghost himself is condemned who gave in tongues to the apostles of Christ to speak the Word of God in all the languages that were ordained of God under heaven.” Both the government of England and the Catholic church took means to reject this translation. King Henry IV and the archbishop criticized it and created new laws to severely censor the new Bible translations. The church eventually pronounced that Wycliffe’s Bible was not to be read in public or private, under pain of excommunication.

Although there were several attempts to bring Wycliffe before church tribunals, and several bulls written against him for his teachings and work, Wycliffe died before he could be convicted of heresy. Now after more than 600 years, there are about 170 handwritten copies of Wycliffe’s Bible that still exist.

### Two Great Treasures

Watchman Nee said, “The Reformation gave us two things: an open Bible and a gospel of grace.

These two things are the greatest treasures for the believers. We thank the Lord that He has bestowed such grace upon us. We cannot honor enough those whom the Lord used to bring about the Reformation and who

*The  
Reformation  
gave us two  
things: an open  
Bible and a  
gospel of grace.*

conveyed the truth to us. God honored them and entrusted to them the greatest work in the history of the church.” (CWWN, *The Christian*). He also noted that: “The purpose of the Reformation was to turn man back to the Bible. . . The greatest goal of the Reformation was to show that nothing is trustworthy except the Bible.” (CWWN: *The Christian*).

Today we may take the Bible for granted. Many people have several copies. But we should appreciate anew that the Bible is truly God’s gift to man. It is His means of communicating and revealing Himself and His intention to His



people. If the Bible was not available, not much of the truth could be opened up. We surely thank the Lord and honor the early translators who began to open the Word of God. Without their work we could not come to the full knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4), be made wise unto salvation (2 Tim. 3:15), or even be regenerated by the incorruptible seed (1 Pet. 1:23). How could we practically come to know Christ without being able to read the Bible as the clear, definite explanation and plain revelation of His wonderful person? Without reading and understanding the Scriptures, we cannot be adequately supplied in our Christian life (Matt. 4:4; 1 Pet. 2:2) or be taught, convicted, corrected, and equipped as a man of God (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Thank the Lord for giving us such a gift and for giving such faithful servants as John Wycliffe to the church to begin to bring to His children the open Bible.

### Example of Wycliffe’s Texts

The verses below give a little taste of Wycliffe’s translation of the Latin Vulgate into Middle English.



John 1:4-5 reads as follows:

In hym was lijf, and the lijf was the liyt of men; and the liyt schyneth in derknessis, and derknessis comprehendiden not it.

And John 3:16 as:

Forsothe God louede the world, that he gaf his oon bigetun sone, that ech man that bileueth in to him perische not, but haue euerlastyng lyf.

Marty Robert and Bill Lawson

### References

Broadbent, E. H. *The Pilgrim Church*. Grand Rapids: Gospel Folio Press, 1999.

Cross, F. L. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

Douglas, J. D. *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978.

Fountain, David. *The Dawn of the Reformation*. Cheshire: Mayflower Christian Books, 1984.

Hague, Dyson. *The Life and Work of John Wycliffe*. London: The Church Book Room, 1935.

Lecher, Professor. *John Wycliffe and His English Precursors*. London: The Religious Tract Society, 1904.

Lee, Witness. *The Course of the Church*. Anaheim: Living Stream Publishers, 1993.

Moyer, Elgin. *Wycliffe Biographical Dictionary of the Church*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1982.

Nee, Watchman. *Collected Works of Watchman Nee*. Anaheim: Living Stream Publishers, 1993.

Oberman, Heiko Augustinus. *Forerunners of the Reformation*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981.