

# John Wycliffe

by J.C. Ryle

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*John Wycliffe was a 14th-century English theologian and reformer who laid the groundwork for the Protestant Reformation in England through his advocacy for the sufficiency and supremacy of Holy Scripture, his attack on the errors of the Church of Rome, and his revival of the apostolic ordinance of preaching.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 119:105, Matthew 5:14-16, John 8:32, Acts 17:11, Romans 10:17, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 2 Timothy 4:2, Titus 1:3, Hebrews 4:12, 1 Peter 2:9

**Topics:** "Importance of Scripture", "Legacy of Reformers"

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## Description

J.C. Ryle emphasizes the significant yet often overlooked contributions of John Wycliffe, the 'Morning Star of the English Reformation,' who laid the groundwork for Protestantism in England. Wycliffe's advocacy for the supremacy of Scripture, his critique of the Roman Catholic Church, and his pioneering efforts in translating the Bible into English were monumental in a time of spiritual darkness. Ryle highlights Wycliffe's revival of preaching and the establishment of 'poor priests' to spread the Gospel, which paved the way for future reformers. Despite facing immense challenges, Wycliffe's work and God's providence allowed him to impact his generation profoundly. Ryle calls for a remembrance of Wycliffe's legacy and the importance of preaching the Word of God.

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## Transcript

"But has in due time manifested His word through preaching."

Titus 1:3

It is an old and true saying that nations often know little about some of their greatest benefactors. If there ever was a man to whom this saying applies, it is John Wycliffe, the forerunner and first beginner of the Protestant Reformation in this country. To Wycliffe England owes an enormous debt. Yet Wycliffe is a man of whom most Englishmen know little or nothing. I wish to stir up my readers and make them remember and never forget the man who has been justly called "The Morning Star of the English Reformation."

First and foremost, I shall ask you to remember the religious condition of England in the age when Wycliffe lived. A right understanding of this lies at the very root of my whole subject. Otherwise, it is impossible to form a correct estimate of the man about whom I am writing; of the enormous difficulties he had to contend with; and of the greatness of the work which he did.

John Wycliffe was born in the north of Yorkshire about the year 1324, during the reign of Edward II. He died in 1384 during the reign of Richard II. He was born at least a hundred years before the invention of printing, and he died about a hundred years before the great German Reformer, Martin Luther, was born. These two facts alone should never be forgotten.

The three centuries immediately preceding our English Reformation, in the middle of which Wycliffe lived, were probably the darkest period in the history of English Christianity. It was a period when the Church of this land was thoroughly, entirely, and completely Roman Catholic; when the Bishop of Rome was the spiritual head of the Church; when Romanism reigned supreme and ministers and people were all alike Papists. It is no exaggeration to say that for these three centuries before the Reformation, Christianity in England seems to have been buried under a mass of ignorance, superstition, priestcraft, and immorality. The likeness between the religion of this period and that of the apostolic age was so small, that if St. Paul had risen from the dead, he would hardly have called it Christianity at all.

That Wycliffe did a great work in a very dark day, that he made a deep impression on his generation, that he was felt and acknowledged to be "a power" in England both by Church and Parliament for some twenty-five years, is a simple matter of history which no well-read person can deny. But there is much obscurity about his early life. We know nothing of his first schools and schoolmasters, and can only guess that he may have picked up the first rudiments of his education at Eggleston Priory. We do know that he went to Oxford between 1335 and 1340 and profited so much by the instruction, that he obtained a very high reputation as one of the most learned men of his day. He was made Master of Balliol in 1361, and was afterwards connected with Queen's, Merton, and Canterbury Hall. For about twenty years, Oxford seems to have been his headquarters, though he evidently was often in London. Lecturing, preaching, writing, arguing, and engaging in controversy appear to have been the diet of his life. But we have no minute and systematic account of his life from the pen of any contemporary biographer. How he first obtained his sound theological views, we know little or nothing.

We should gratefully remember that Wycliffe was one of the first Englishmen who maintained the sufficiency and supremacy of Holy Scripture as the only rule of faith and practice. The importance of this great principle can never be overrated. It lies at the very foundation of Protestant Christianity. It is the backbone of the Articles of the Church of England and of every sound Church in Christendom. The true Christian was intended by Christ to prove all things by the Word of God--all churches, all ministers, all teaching, all preaching, all doctrines, all sermons, all writings, all opinions, all practices. That which can abide the fire of the Bible--receive, hold, believe, and obey. That which cannot abide the fire of the Bible--reject, refuse, repudiate, and cast away. This is the standard which Wycliffe raised in England.

Let us gratefully remember that Wycliffe was one of the first Englishmen who attacked and denounced the errors of the Church of Rome. The sacrifice of the Mass and Transubstantiation, the ignorance and immorality of the priesthood, the tyranny of the See of Rome, the uselessness of trusting to other mediators than Christ, the dangerous tendency of the confessional--all these and other kindred doctrines will be found unsparingly exposed in his writings. On all these points he was a thorough Protestant Reformer a century and a half before the Reformation.

Let us gratefully remember that Wycliffe was one of the first, if not the very first, Englishmen who revived the apostolic ordinance of preaching. The "poor priests," as they were called, whom he sent about the country to teach, were one of the greatest benefits which he conferred on his generation. They sowed the seed of thoughts among the people and, I believe, paved the way for the Reformation. If men want to do

good for the multitude, if they want to reach their hearts and consciences, they must walk in the steps of Wycliffe, Latimer, Luther, Chrysostom, and St. Paul. They must preach the Word.

Let us ever gratefully remember that Wycliffe was the first Englishman who translated the Bible into the English language, and thus enabled it to be understood by the people. The difficulty of this work we cannot conceive. There were probably very few who could help the translator in any way. The whole book had to be laboriously written in manuscript form, and by written manuscript alone could copies be multiplied. To inspect the machinery and apparatus of our blessed Bible Society in Blackfriars today, and then to think of the stupendous toil which Wycliffe must have gone through, is enough to take one's breath away. But with God's help nothing is impossible. The work was done, and hundreds of copies were circulated. In spite of every effort to suppress the book and destroy it, no less than 170 complete copies were found extant when it was reprinted at Oxford some 40 years ago. The good that was done by the translation of the Bible will probably never be known till the last day. I shall never hesitate to assert that the possession of the Bible in one's own language is the greatest possible national blessing.

I do not tell you that this great man had no weak points, held no disputable opinions, and was sound on every theological doctrine. I say nothing of the kind. He lived in a twilight age and had to work out many a problem in divinity without the slightest help from man. He wrote much, and wrote, perhaps, hastily; and I do not pretend to endorse all that he wrote. Like Luther and Cranmer, at the beginning he was not clear on all points. But when I consider his solitary, isolated, difficult position, I only wonder that he was as free from error as he was.

How Wycliffe escaped without a violent death and finally died quietly in his bed at Lutterworth, is a miracle indeed. But it is evident to my mind that God protected him in a miraculous way. It was God who raised up John of Gaunt and the Princess of Wales to favor him. It was God who sent the earthquake which broke up a London Synod, when it was about to condemn him. It was God who inclined the University of Oxford to give him support. The Council of Constance had not yet set the example of . . .[executing] heretics. The Council of Trent had not yet crystallized and formulated all Popish doctrine. But above all, I see the hand of God over Wycliffe; the hand of Him who said, "When a man's ways please the Lord, he makes his enemies to be at peace with him." He was immortal until his work was done.

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