

## **Burned at the Stake**

From 'Men of Destiny' By Dr Peter Masters



*Thomas Bilney*



*William Tyndale*



*Hugh Latimer*

WHAT KIND OF COURAGE was it that made people willing to perish in the searing flames of martyrdom in the turbulent days of the English Reformation? What was the experience of faith that turned even cowards into heroes? This is the story of three very different men who died at the stake rather than deny their personal experience of the living God.

It was in 1517 that Martin Luther nailed to the door of the Castle Church, Wittenberg, the 'Ninety-Five Theses' which exposed the darkness and tyranny of the Roman Church and touched off the Reformation in Germany. At that time, the picturesque towns and green countryside of England lay under the rule of Henry VIII, while the nation's religion was increasingly dominated by Thomas Wolsey – cardinal archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church.

Wolsey was a priest with a burning ambition – twice frustrated – to be elected pope. He had climbed the ecclesiastical power ladder in a spectacular manner after being appointed a King's chaplain. At forty he became Archbishop of York, acquired (by political chicanery) a cardinal's hat within a year, and then took over the seals of the Lord Chancellor from the Archbishop of Canterbury to become, after the King, the most powerful man in both church and state. Wolsey was without doubt an arrogant and greedy ruler. Whenever he appeared in public he would be splendidly robed in scarlet velvet, with two priests carrying silver crossed walking in front of him. His palace staff numbered over 500 people, not including the army of agents and spies on his payroll. If he could not *yet* be pope, he certainly intended to live as a pope in England, and to preserve the power and the supremacy of the Roman church.

In those days, if anyone failed to honour and obey a priest of Rome, he was liable to suffer the same fate as John Browne of Ashford, who was 'insolent' enough to contradict a priest by exposing his ignorance in public. Within a few weeks Browne was brutally dragged out of his house, thrown into prison, and burned alive as a heretic.

The teaching of Wolsey's Church amounted to nothing more than superstition, image worship, and empty ritual. It was a 'faith' which was imposed by force – on pain of burning – upon the whole nation, and there seemed no prospect of any change as the might of the civil Government upheld the Church. Nevertheless, events began to occur, which led in time to dramatic turn of events. Supplies of a small book started to come into Britain and filter into the Universities. It was the New Testament, produced by the Dutch Scholar Erasmus, first in Greek, and also later in a Latin addition.

Immediately the presence of these New Testaments provoked a storm of protest from the 'Holy Church' The priests knew that such books would cause students to question and doubt the power and authority of the pope and bishops. In fact, the outlawed book did far more than this – it transformed in heart and life large numbers of its readers.

At Cambridge in 1519 there was a short, slightly-built student of about 24 named Thomas Bilney, recently made a priest, and now studying Church law. He was a studious young man who took his religion very seriously, believing that if he could live up to God's commandments his soul would be saved. The only trouble was – just like Luther some years previously – he felt that he could not live up to those standards. The more he tried, the more his conscience showed him his faults and threw him into despair, driving him to his fellow priests for help. He would confess his sins to them, and they would prescribe penances, but all this did nothing to make Bilney feel that his sins were blotted out and forgiven by God.

Soon he began to suspect his fellow priests as – ‘wolves who seek nothing from their flock except their milk, wool and hide...leaving their souls to the devil.’ Bilney spent all his money paying their penances, then gave up in despair and fell to doubting whether there was a God of mercy at all. How he longed to know the truth.

One morning as he walked up to a group of friends, he heard them talking about Jesus Christ. Anxious to know what they were discussing, he was surprised to find they had secured copies of the Erasmus New Testament which was causing so much trouble. Thomas Bilney secretly bought himself a copy and began to read. He later wrote: ‘At the first reading I well remember I fell by chance on this sentence of Paul – the most comforting sentence to my soul – *This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners: of whom I am chief.*’ Bilney felt as if his soul had been released from prison. ‘This one sentence did so uplift my heart, which had previously been wounded with guilt and almost in despair, that immediately I felt a marvellous comfort and quietness, in as much as my bruised bones leapt for joy.’ The thought that a *chief* sinner could be sure of being saved astonished him. And if this was so, surely he too could be saved.

He had always thought that the church had the power to save souls by such means as the mass, priestly absolutions and penances, but according to his New Testament people were not saved by any mediating action of the Church or priests, but by the free gift of forgiveness available to any repentant sinner who applied in prayer directly to Christ. ‘I see it all,’ he said. ‘My vigils, my fastings, my pilgrimages, my purchase of masses and indulgences, were destroying rather than saving me.’

Thomas Bilney turned to Christ in earnest, secret prayer that very day, asking that He would forgive and accept him. He realised that he was totally unable to earn the forgiveness of God by anything which he could do. He now grasped that he must depend on Christ to do everything necessary, and he believed with all his heart that Christ had taken the punishment for all his sins on Calvary's cross. He prayed that God would change his life and become real to him, and he yielded over his life to Him. The result was that he *felt* forgiven, and he *felt* that he had become a child of God. At last he knew that God was working in his life.

Bilney was the first of a group of Cambridge men who came to know God through reading His Word. Although by nature shy and reserved, he immediately began to speak to others about his discovery, and a number of fellow priests met with him daily to study the New Testament, some of whom were to become martyrs for the sake of Christ. He then applied himself to preaching in the towns and villages of East Anglia the message of the Gospel – *repent and be converted* – believing that God had called him to ‘evangelise His people’.

In the rest of the country increasing numbers of educated people were beginning to question the teaching and authority of the Church as copies of Luther's books came through the ports from Germany. Cardinal Wolsey was enraged. Breathing out death-threats to anyone found in possession of these ‘heretical’ books he ordered a public bonfire for them at St. Paul's.

At Cambridge the new learning was becoming even more infectious. Hugh Latimer was a contemporary of Thomas Bilney. A wealthy farmer's son with a powerful intellect and a great force of character, he too was a priest studying further divinity. But he was absolutely set against the new religious views of Bilney and others. Latimer still believed in the magic and mystery of the Roman Church. Indeed, he used to worry greatly at the mass for fear that he had not mingled the wine and water well enough for it to turn into the blood of Christ. It was more than he could stand when some of the lecturers began to teach the scriptures straight from the Greek Testament. In 1524, to mark the completion of his graduate studies, Latimer was due to preach before the whole assembled university. He chose as his subject the denigration of Luther's colleague, Phillip Melancthon, putting all his passion into an attack on the book of the German Reformation.

In the crowd of listeners stood Thomas Bilney. As he watched Latimer, he saw a priest of the Church, devoted to its pomp and ceremony, yet at the same time he saw a man who in reality had no personal experience of the Lord God in his own life.

When the speech was over Bilney quietly approached Latimer and asked if he could speak with him. ‘Bilney heard me at the time,’ said Latimer, ‘and perceived that I was zealous without knowledge; and he came to me afterwards in my study, and requested me, for God’s sake, to hear his Testimony. I did so – and to say the truth, by his words I learned more than before in many years... from that time forward I began to savour the Word of God, and forsook the school doctors and such fooleries.’

In the quietness of Hugh Latimer’s study, Bilney had told him how he had found forgiveness of sins, and how people could come to know God personally in the simple way described in the Bible. ‘Master Bilney was the instrument by which God called me to knowledge...for I was as obstinate a papist as anyone in England.’

Hugh Latimer underwent an experience of conversion in the true biblical sense: *if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.* He dropped his old ways and joined Bilney in spreading the faith of the Bible. He became a preacher of great power and many people came to know God through his preaching in the university and town of Cambridge.

The opponents of the Reformation observed with mounting apprehension the great crowds of people flocking into the churches whenever Latimer, Bilney, and their friends preached, and they began to plan ways of silencing them. The diocesan bishop was urged to deal with them as heretics, but when he swooped on a Church one evening to hear Latimer’s heresies at first hand, the young preacher changed his subject and foiled his persecutor. Within a year, however, persecution began in earnest. One of Bilney’s collaborators had preached a Christmas Eve sermon in which he condemned the evil ways of the bishops. Within two months he was arrested, taken to London, and threatened with burning. The iron hand of the Church was now raised against these Bible – believing priests and academics. Soon, however, a new vehicle would be spreading the Word of God into the homes of ordinary people. This was the English translation of the New Testament from the pen of William Tyndale.

Tyndale, a former student at both Oxford and Cambridge, had undergone the same conversation experience as Bilney and Latimer soon after being consecrated a priest. Subsequently he had gone to live at little Sodbury Manor, the stately home of sir John Walsh in Gloucestershire, to be governor to his children. Tyndale found that whenever he tried to explain the biblical way of salvation to people, the monks and priests resisted him for all they were worth by spreading lies and rumours to discredit him and his message. ‘I perceived by bitter experience,’ he wrote, ‘that it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth except the Scriptures were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue.’ On one occasion Tyndale exclaimed to a haughty priest who derided the Bible – ‘If God spared my life, before many years I will cause that drives the plough to know more of the Scripture than you.’

Let the people be deceived no longer by the Church, thought Tyndale; they must see the Word of God for themselves. Sir John and his family shared Tyndale’s understanding of the Bible and encouraged him in his translation efforts, but soon opposition grew to such a pitch, that he had to pack his few belongings and move to London. He hoped to secure the protection of the Bishop of London, who was not yet so openly antagonistic to the Reformation as he later became. But Tyndale’s hopes proved to be naïve, for he found the Bishop altogether unsympathetic.

Though Tyndale gained a friend and supporter in a wealthy London merchant named Humphrey Monmoth, he realised that it would be suicidal to translate the Scriptures anywhere in England, and so 1524 he sailed to Hamburg, never to set foot in his native land again. On arrival, he travelled through Germany and called upon Luther, who warmly welcomed him and gave him a place where he could carry out his great work. In one year, the translation was ready for the printer, the only hindrance being that most printers were located in countries where it was illegal to print Bibles. Tyndale’s first attempt to print in Cologne was discovered by the authorities. He had to escape with as much as he could carry and flee to Worms, where the first copies were at last successfully printed.

Just when the authorities in England were arresting the Bible-preaching clergy, no less than 6,000 English Testaments were smuggled into England by Humphrey Monmoth, collaborating with continental merchants. Soon, Bilney and Latimer were seized and sent to stand trial before Cardinal Wolsey. On this first occasion they were not condemned. In fact, Latimer was given freedom to preach all over England. But the warning shot had been fired, and the Bible men were commanded to teach in accordance with the practices of Rome.

As Tyndale’s Testaments streamed into the country, the authorities grew still more alarmed. Anyone caught in possession of a copy faced the death of a heretic, and St Paul’s, a massive public bonfire was made from hundreds of confiscated copies. When investigating agents uncovered the secret distribution network for these New Testaments, the young men and women responsible had to flee abroad to save their lives. Ultimately Henry VIII – at the instigation of Wolsey – issued orders to British foreign agents to track down Tyndale and put him to death.

The pace of events quickened further when in 1527 Bilney, who had continued preaching from the Bible, was arrested on the orders of Wolsey. Through desperately cold November nights he lay in a damp cell, awaiting trial for heresy. The Bishop of London, his appointed prosecutor and judge, tried hard to save him from death by persuading him to renounce his errors. 'Submit to authority of the Church,' he pleaded, 'and affirm that God speaks only through her.' Bilney, however, was determined to stand firm, and after all efforts to persuade him had failed, the exasperated bishop uttered his verdict: 'By the consent and counsel of my colleagues here present, I do pronounce thee, Thomas Bilney... to be convicted of heresy.' The public – even the king – wondered whether the new faith of the Cambridge scholar would stand the test of being threatened with death.

Three nights before Bilney was due for sentence, during which his friends crowded into his cell and pleaded with him to preserve his life. Weakened and sickened by the whole ordeal and demoralised by his friends Bilney suddenly broke down, signed the document of recantation and confessed his 'errors'. The result was public humiliation, in which he was made to lay a faggot on a bonfire of New Testaments and other Reformation books, plus twelve months imprisonment, and untold anguish of soul.

A distraught man emerged from prison the following year, for poor Bilney had lost his peace and communion with God. Nothing could comfort him. Like the apostle Peter, he had denied his Lord. By 1531, however, he gradually recovered his faith and came to the conclusion that there was only one course open to him to make amends for his failure. One evening, after saying goodbye to his friends in Cambridge, he set off into Norfolk to preach the faith in the open fields. He spoke to great crowds explaining God's way of forgiveness, attacking the superstitions of Rome, and openly repenting of his momentary denial of the Biblical way of salvation. Wherever he went he also read publicly from Tyndale's New Testament, knowing full well what the outcome would be.

By July, Bilney had worked his way down to London, preaching everywhere. Then he went to Norwich where he continued to preach and distribute copies of the New Testament. This intensive programme of activity led to his being reported to Sir Thomas More, now Lord Chancellor in place of Wolsey, who ordered his arrest and imprisonment in the Tower of London. Thomas Bilney was taken back to Norwich for trial, and condemned to burn at the stake for heresy. Sir Thomas More – a fanatical Catholic who wholly approved the burning of 'heretics' – readily supplied the warrant. The day before his execution Bilney prepared himself by repeating the promise of God in *Isaiah 43:2*- *When thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.* This, he said, meant that as the fire consumed the stubble of his body, the fire of the Holy Spirit could purify and take his soul, and he would enter into unspeakable joy.

On 19<sup>th</sup> August 1531, Bilney was escorted to the place where he was to be burned, called the Lollards' Pit, just outside the Norwich city wall. After confessing his faith to a deeply moved crowd, the slender figure of the Cambridge convert ascended the pile of wood and reeds reciting *Psalms 143*, repeating particularly the verse – *I stretch forth my hands unto thee: my soul thirsteth after thee, as a thirsty land.*

Foxe, the martyrologist, records: 'The sheriff's men then put the reeds and faggots about his body, and set fire to the reeds, which made a great blaze, and blackened his face; but the flames were blown away from him several times, the wind being very high, till at length, the wood taking fire, the flame was stronger, and so he yielded up the ghost. The first Catholic priest to be converted to Christ in the English Reformation had joined the ranks of the Reformation martyrs, and gone to meet his Lord.

Less than four years later, in 1535, Tyndale was living in the house of a sympathetic merchant of Antwerp, having avoided his persecutors for years, when he was at last located by an agent from Britain, posing as a friend. Having won Tyndale's confidence, his hunter lured him to a dark alley where an ambush had been prepared. The Reformer was seized and taken bound to the Castle of Vilvorde near Brussels, where he was thrown into a stinking, rat-infested dungeon. After eighteen months Tyndale was put on trial for maintaining that faith in the Gospel is all that is required to obtain salvation, and for dismissing Catholic dogma. He was condemned as a heretic, unfrocked, excommunicated from the Church, and then in October 1536, led out for public execution. In the prison yard of the Castle of Vilvorde, after defying the final command to renounce his opinions, his gaunt, tired form was bound to a stake. Bystanders marvelled at his patience, and all heard the sympathetic tone of his last audible prayer, 'Lord, open the King of England's eyes.' First he was strangled with an iron chain, then his body was burned. William Tyndale, aged 42 joined the martyr throng having made the greatest contribution of any man to the translation of the Bible into English.

Hugh Latimer also suffered interrogation and temporary imprisonment – but the authorities had to be more careful with him for he had been appointed a royal chaplain in 1530, and preached frequently before the king, who held him in high regard. Latimer's persecutors were filled with dismay when, in

1535, Henry invited him to preach more sermons at Greenwich Palace, and appointed him Bishop of Worcester. With the protection of royal favour, Latimer preached ceaselessly round the country for four years, until Henry VIII compelled the clergy to submit to Roman Catholic doctrines as compulsory in the Church. Latimer apposed these measures, relinquished his bishopric, and was silenced for eight years, finally suffering arrest and confinement in the Tower of London until the young King Edward VI came to the throne in 1547.

Edward's accession marked a turning point for those who taught the biblical way of salvation. Latimer was released and for six years preached to the king and in every part of England as the principal evangelist among the Reformers. 'It was the sermons of Latimer,' said one noble historian, 'which more than any other factor established the principles of the Reformation in the minds and hearts of the people.'



THOMAS CRANMER



NICHOLAS RIDLEY

At the same time Cranmer, Ridley and others revised the teaching and worship of the Church.

The bishops and priests loyal to Rome saw their power destroyed, but they soon had an opportunity to re-establish Catholicism and to persecute and destroy biblical Christianity when the early death of Edward in 1553 brought Mary to the throne.

Mary Tudor married Philip II of Spain and determined to restore the Roman Church in England. In doing so, she had Hugh Latimer, Thomas Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley and almost 300 other leaders of the Reformation burned at the stake as heretics.

A warrant duly went out for Latimer's arrest, and he was brought to the Tower with Cranmer and Ridley and committed for trial. He was eventually led out for burning two years later in 1555, now eighty years of age. Together with Ridley he was chained to a stake in front of Balliol College, Oxford, with a bag of gunpowder round his neck and faggots piled about him. As the fire was lit, Latimer uttered his famous words, 'Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day, by God's grace, light such a candle in England, that shall never be put out.'

He was right. The retaliation of the Church of Rome did not survive for long. Believers in the Bible could be martyred, books could be burned, the clergy could be made to conform – *but the word of God is not bound* (2 Timothy 2.9). The power at work in the land was the Bible, which continued to transform the spiritual attitude of hundreds of thousands of people as it worked in their minds and hearts. The land was set free from the superstition and darkness of medieval Romanism, and given the message of direct access to God by the work of Christ in dying for sinners.

It was not Henry VIII, or the bishops, or any other human power which brought the Reformation to England, for most were set against it. It was the power of the Scriptures bringing the meaning of true faith in Christ to the people, and so real was their discovery to all who found Christ – men, women, teenagers and little children also – that they were prepared even to burn, rather than deny their Lord.