

"The Most Healthful Medicine"

WHY, AND HOW, EVERYONE SHOULD READ THE BIBLE.

THOMAS CRANMER



To help people read the Bible, Cranmer wrote a preface to the Great Bible (1540), which was appointed by Henry VIII to be placed in churches across England. In the preface, the archbishop pastorally counsels two types of parishioners and shows his

zeal for and devotion to Scripture.

For two sundry sorts of people it seemeth much necessary that something be said in the entry of this book. . . .

For truly some there are that be too slow and need the spur; some other seem too quick and need more of the bridle; some lose their game by short shooting, some by overshooting; some walk too much on the left hand, some too much on the right.

In the former sort be all they that refuse to read, or to hear read the Scripture in the vulgar [common] tongues; much worse they that also let [hinder] or discourage the other from the reading or hearing thereof. . . .

Neither can I well tell [which] of

them I may judge the [greater] offender, him that doth obstinately refuse so godly and goodly knowledge, or him that so ungodly and so ungodly doth abuse the same.

Food, fire, light

And as touching the former, I would marvel much that any man should be so mad as to refuse in darkness, light; in hunger, food; in cold, fire. . . .

I would marvel (I say) at this, save that I consider how much custom and usage may do. So that if there were a people . . . which never saw the sun by reason that they be situated far toward the North Pole and be enclosed and overshadowed with

high mountains, it is credible and like enough that if, by the power and will of God, the mountains should sink down and give place, [and] the light of the sun might have entrance to them—at the first some of them would be offended therewith. . . .

Such is the nature of custom that it causeth us to bear all things well and easily wherewith we have been accustomed, and to be offended with all things thereunto contrary.

And therefore I can well think them worthy pardon which, at the coming abroad of Scripture, doubted and drew back. But such as will persist still in their willfulness, I must needs judge not only foolish, forward, and obstinate, but also peevish, perverse, and indurate.

The utility of Scripture

But now to . . . pass [on from] custom, and to weigh, as wise men ever should, the thing in [its] own nature: let us here discuss what availeth Scripture to be had and read [by] the lay and vulgar [common] people.

And to this question I intend here to say nothing but that was spoken and written by the noble doctor and most moral divine, St. John Chrysostom [the Greek church father of Antioch and Constantinople, 340-407], in his third sermon *De Lazaro*. . . .

He exhorteth there his audience that every man should read by himself at home in the mean days and time, between sermon and sermon, to the intent they might both more profoundly fix in their minds and memories that he had said before upon such texts, whereupon he had already preached; and also that they might have their minds the more ready and better prepared to receive and perceive that which he should say from thenceforth in his sermons, upon such texts as he had not yet declared and preached upon. . . .

In few words [we] comprehend the largeness and utility of the Scripture, how it containeth fruitful instruction and erudition for every man; [how] if anything be necessary to be learned, of the holy Scripture we may learn it. If falsehood shall be reproved, thereof we may gather wherewithal. If anything be to be corrected and amended, if there need any exhortation or consolation, of the Scripture we may well learn.

In the Scriptures be the fat pastures of the soul; therein is no venomous meat, no unwholesome thing; they be the very dainty and pure feeding. He that is ignorant shall find there what he should learn. He that is a perverse sinner shall there find his damnation to make him to tremble for fear. He that laboreth to serve God shall find there his glory and the promises of eternal life, exhorting him more diligently to labor.

Herein may princes learn how to govern their subjects; subjects [may learn] obedience, love, and dread to[wards] their princes; husbands how they should behave them unto their wives [and] how to educate their children and servants; and con-

trary, the wives, children, and servants may know their duty to their husbands, parents, and masters.

Here . . . men, women, young, old, learned, unlearned, rich, poor, priests, laymen, lords, ladies, officers, tenants and mean men, virgins, wives, widows, lawyers, merchants,

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The Great Bible is presented to Henry VIII.

artificers, husbandmen—and all manner of persons, of what estate or condition soever they be—may in this book learn . . . what they ought to believe, what they ought to do, and what they should not do, as well concerning Almighty God as also concerning themselves and all other.

Briefly, to the reading of the Scripture none can be enemy, but that either be so sick that they love not to hear of any medicine, or else that be so ignorant that they know not Scripture to be the most healthful medicine. . . .

Sober and fruitful learner

Therefore now to come to the second and latter part of my purpose. There is nothing so good in this world but it may be abused and turned from fruitful and wholesome to hurtful and noisome.

What is there above better than the sun, the moon, the stars? Yet was

there [any] that took occasion by the great beauty and virtue of them to dishonor God and to defile themselves with idolatry, giving the honor of the living God and Creator of all things to such things as he had created? What is there here beneath better than fire, water, meats, drinks, metals of gold, silver, iron, and steel? Yet we see daily great harm and much mischief done by every one of these. . . .

Thus to them that be evil of themselves everything setteth forward and increaseth their evil, be it of [its] own nature a thing never so good; like as contrarily, to them that studieth and endeavoreth themselves to goodness, everything prevaileth them and profiteth unto good, be it of [its] own nature a thing never so bad. . . . Even as out of most venomous worms is made treacle [antidote for poison], the most sovereign medicine for the preservation of man's health in time of danger.

Wherefore I would advise you all that cometh to the reading or hearing of this book, which is the Word of God, the most precious jewel and most holy relic that remaineth upon earth, that ye bring with you the fear of God, and that ye do it with all due reverence, and use your knowledge thereof not to vainglory [or] frivolous disputation but to the honor of God, increase of virtue, and edification both of yourselves and other. . . .

Every man that cometh to the reading of this holy book ought to bring with him . . . [also] a firm and stable purpose to reform his own self according thereunto; and so to continue, proceed, and prosper from time to time, showing himself to be a sober and fruitful hearer and learner. Which if he do, he shall prove at the length well able to teach, though not with his mouth yet with his living and good example, which is surely the most lively and most effectual form and manner of teaching. **☐**

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A Letter from Prison, In Tyndale's Own Hand

The only known writing in Tyndale's hand still extant, this correspondence came from Tyndale sometime in the winter of 1535, as he was imprisoned in Vilvoorde Castle. It was addressed to the governor of the castle, that very Marquis of Bergen to whom Lord Chancellor Thomas Cromwell had already appealed on Tyndale's behalf. It appears here in Tyndale's hand, along with a printed transcription of Tyndale's Latin and an English translation of that Latin. Note Tyndale's respectful tone and concern for the governor's spiritual well-being, and the centrality of Tyndale's request for his Bible-translating books.

The Latin Transcribed

Credo non latere te, vir praestantissime, quid de me statutum sit. Quam ob rem, tuam dominationem rogatum habeo, idque per Dominum Jesum, ut si mihi per hiemem hic manendum sit, sollicitus apud dominum commissarium, si forte dignari velit, de rebus meis quas habet, mittere calidiorum biretum; frigus enim patior in capite nimium, oppressus perpetuo catarro qui sub testitudine non nihil augetur.

Calidiorum quoque tunicam, nam, haec quam habeo admodum tenuis est. Item pannum ad caligas reficiendas. Diplois detrita est; camiseae detritae sunt etiam. Camiseam laneam habet, si mittere velit. Habeo quoque apud eum caligas ex crassiori panno ad superius induendum; nocturna biretta calidiora habet etiam: utque vesperi lucernam habere liceat; tediosum quidem est per tenebras solitariae sedere.

Maxime autem omnium tuam clementiam rogo atque obsecro ut ex animo agere velit apud dominum commissarium quatenus dignari velit mihi concedere Bibliam Hebraicam, Grammaticam Hebraicam, et Vocabularium Hebraicum, ut eo studio tempus conteram. Sic tibi obtingat quod maxime optas modo cum animae tuae salute fiat: Verum si aliud consilium de me ceptum [sic] est, ante hiemem perficiendum, patiens ero, Dei expectans voluntatem, ad gloriam gratiae Domini mei Jesu Christi, Cujus Spiritus tuum semper regat pectus. Amen.

W. Tindalus

The English Translation

I believe, right worshipful, that you are not ignorant of what has been determined concerning me [by the Council of Brabant]; therefore I entreat your Lordship, and that by the the Lord Jesus, that if I am to remain here [in Vilvoorde] during the winter, you will request the Procurer to be kind enough to send me from my goods, which he has in his possession, a warmer cap, for I suffer extremely from cold in the head, being afflicted with a perpetual catarrh, which is considerably in-

creased in the cell.

A warmer coat also, for that which I have is very thin; also a piece of cloth to patch my leggings: my overcoat has been worn out; my shirts are also worn out. He has a woolen shirt of mine, if he will be kind enough to send it. I have also with him leggings of thicker cloth for the putting on above; he also has warmer caps for wearing at night. I wish also his permission to have a candle in the evening, for it is wearisome to sit alone in the dark.

But above all, I entreat and beseech your clemency to be urgent with the Procurer that

he may kindly permit me to have my Hebrew Bible, Hebrew Grammar, and Hebrew Dictionary, that I may spend my time with that study. And in return, may you obtain your dearest wish, provided always it be consistent with the salvation of your soul. But if any other resolutions have been come to concerning me, before the conclusion of the winter, I shall be patient, abiding the will of God to the glory of the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ, whose spirit, I pray, may ever direct your heart. Amen.

W. Tyndale

