

GREAT RESOLUTIONS

Program Sixteen

The Morning Star of the Reformation

Part One on the Life of John Wycliffe

We, the believers living today, owe a debt of gratitude to the saints of the Middle Ages. Although they did not possess the revelation of the Scriptures in comprehensive fullness, they were faithful to the light they did receive, and this light effectively penetrated centuries of darkness and opened the way for the brighter light that would shine during the Reformation.

John Wycliffe was the first person to translate the Bible into English. A scholar, philosopher, teacher and reformer, he was one of the most important persons of the 14th century, and some would maintain, of the western world. As we look at the life and work of John Wycliffe, we recall again our need to learn from the saints of the past. Witness Lee reminds us: “We cannot ignore those who have gone before us. . . Today we are standing on their shoulders, and a great deal of our knowledge of the Bible has been gained from them” (*Full Knowledge of the Word of God*).

A Time of Darkness

The Middle Ages (approximately A.D. 500 to AD 1500) was a period of time marked by profound spiritual darkness. The light of the Lord that had shone brightly in the early years of the church through the apostles’ teaching and fellowship began to dim as degradation gradually crept into the church. Many truths were lost and ignorance and superstition began to prevail; darkness became the norm. According to Ephesians 4:18, darkness alienates people from the life of God and it is the result of ignorance and hardness of heart. During the Middle Ages most leaders of the corrupted church were steeped in darkness. They became the blind guides of the blind.

Thus, God had a need for some of His children to rise up to shine as luminaries in the darkness and hold forth the word of life

(Phil. 2:15-16).

Watchman Nee notes that “God lit the lamp at the time of the Reformation (*CWWN: The Christian*). But even before the Reformation, light was beginning to appear. Witness Lee points out: “the Reformation was brought in through Martin Luther. However, before Martin Luther, there were some who were quite enlightened and who rose up to speak for God in protest to degraded Christianity. Two of the most powerful ones were John Wycliffe on the British Isles and John Huss on the Continent. Both of them were very

strong, and the light they received from the Bible was also quite clear. Before the time of Luther, they rose up and told people

that the Roman Catholic Church was an apostate church, that she had left the revelation of God, and that her actions were completely against God; under her, they said, the church had become completely degraded. They gave numerous illustrations and released much light, and their words were received by many people. In their time, they laid a very good foundation for the Reformation” (*The Testimony and the Ground of the Church*).

John Wycliffe lived toward the end of the Middle Ages. The night was far advanced and the day was drawing near. Wycliffe began to cast off the works of darkness and to put on the weapons of light (Rom. 13:12). He is known as the morning star of the reformation.

Wycliffe was born around 1330 in Yorkshire, England. Little is recorded of his

Before Martin Luther there were some who were quite enlightened who rose up to speak for God in protest to degraded Christianity.

Witness Lee



early years, but we know that from the young age of 16 he began rigorous university studies at Oxford. It was there he came under the influence of scholars such as Thomas

Bradwardine, a mathematician who *was deeply versed in the Scriptures for his time*. At Oxford, Wycliffe advanced among his peers and become one of the most renowned scholars in all of England. After receiving a doctor of theology degree in 1372, he became Master of one of the Oxford colleges. As such, he was esteemed to be the ablest member of the faculty.

Many of Wycliffe's colleagues who studied theology considered it beneath their dignity to read and study the Bible, while others preferred the writings of Aquinas, Augustine and various philosophers. Wycliffe, however, diligently studied the Scriptures and immersed himself in them. He became known as the "Gospel Doctor." His hunger for the Word and capacity to learn from the Scriptures *enlightened his being and began to govern his understanding and drive his scholarly pursuits*. Wycliffe's apprehension of the Word was the main reason this brilliant man had such a great impact on English history. He helped open the way for the people of the time to be freed from the tyranny of the Roman church and be brought back to the Scriptures and to Christ.

His Conversion

Although Bradwardine and others influenced Wycliffe to study the Scriptures while he was at Oxford, it was the great pestilence of the Black Death that caused him to come to the Lord in a personal way. The plague decimated the population of England, and Wycliffe was sobered by the terror and mourning around him. Deeply impressed with God's coming judgment, Wycliffe considered anew eternal matters and could

only find relief in the Scriptures: they pointed him to Christ, and he found grace.

Wycliffe was clear that salvation was through Christ's redemption: "When we were sinful and the children of wrath, God's Son came out of heaven and, praying His Father for His enemies, He died for us. . . We shall be saved, now made righteous through His blood."

Wycliffe was a forerunner in the matter of justification. He declared, "Trust wholly in Christ; rely

altogether on His sufferings; beware of seeking to be justified in any other way than by His righteousness. Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ is sufficient for salvation."

*Faith in our
Lord Jesus
Christ is
sufficient for
salvation.*

Struggle against Medieval Darkness

As Wycliffe became *intimately* acquainted with the Scriptures, he realized more and more clearly how degraded the church had become. He began to espouse ideas that were radical to most people. He advocated that people should have a direct relationship with God and be directly responsible to God. He disagreed with worshipping relics and statues, with the sale of indulgences and with the clergy's control of the mind and conscience of the people through fear and superstitious teachings. He understood that the cause of many of the problems among the people at that time was a dearth of the truth. The system of error that had developed promoted many questionable practices and false teachings. (Eph. 4:14). Wycliffe began to expose these teachings and practices by speaking and writing about them. No doubt, he knew that only the shining of the light could annul the darkness. In his speaking and writing, he endeavored to bring people back to the light of the Scriptures and to Christ.

Exposing the Power, Wealth, and Corruption of Catholicism

The Lord predicted in Matthew 13:33 that corruption would enter the church. In the parable there, a woman took leaven and

hid it in three measures of meal until the whole was leavened. This signified that evil things and evil doctrines would enter the church to cause an inward corruption to take place. This decline took place over centuries and reached its lowest point during these years of darkness.

The situation during the Middle Ages was drastically different from the time of the Lord's earthly ministry and that of the apostles. The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). But as Wycliffe noted, the clergy at his time were "so occupied in heart about worldly lordships, and with pleas of business, that no habit of devotion, of praying, of thoughtfulness on heavenly things, on the sins of their own hearts, or on those of other men, may be preserved; neither may they be found studying and preaching the gospel, nor visiting and comforting of poor men."

Instead, the religious leaders were contending with the secular leaders for wealth and dominion over the peoples in many countries throughout Europe.

The pope claimed dominion over all monarchs within Christendom. Those with the Roman church reasoned that the popes and the priests could rule over men's souls, and that even the souls of the kings were under them. They considered that the church was greater and higher than all worldly monarchies, and should therefore reign even over political affairs and all the rulers of nations should be subject to them. At one point the King surrendered the crown of England unto the pope. This greatly offended many as the nation was humiliated.

Along with seeking the subjection of the nations to Rome, the Roman church also sought their funds. Papal taxation increased the holdings of church properties in many European countries and drained them of their wealth. There were times in England that more money was going out to Rome than was coming into the Crown. During Wycliffe's time, it is estimated that the pope was receiving five times as much income as the king of England. During Wycliffe's time, the pope was demanding of England 1000 marks

annually and the papal ownership of property grew to one third of all England's property. Even some of their taxes ended up in France during the time of the papal schism and was used to support the war efforts of France against England. As a result of this money drain much of the nation began to fall into disrepair, even their hospitals.

The effect of this injustice was great upon England. The atmosphere of many in the parliament and even of the common people was turned against Rome. Eventually the leaders of the country refused the papal demands for money. The men of parliament argued that the pope should be a minister of the gospel, not a temporal ruler. They unanimously rejected the pope's claim for temporal jurisdiction.

Wycliffe himself entered this battle with Rome. Although many of his stands were on religious grounds, he often became involved in political discussions, and even served the king in some of these matters. He became very influential in many of the discussions with the government officials, and at times, became their voice. Wycliffe felt that no clergy should hold any secular offices and that the church should surrender all this property back to England.

Watchman Nee, in studying this period of church history, said, "The Reformation took place during a time in which the nations in Europe could

no longer tolerate Catholicism's suppression. During the Reformation . . . two kinds of forces were at work: One

was of God, while the other was of man. The Reformation became a political reformation as well as a religious reformation. Part of the reason was that Roman Catholicism was armed with not only religious power but also political power. At that time the Roman Catholic Church ruled over the whole of Europe. The Reformation was originally a religious movement. However, kings, rulers,

The nations in Europe could no longer tolerate Catholicism's suppression.
Watchman Nee

and politicians of many countries seized this opportunity to free themselves from the tyranny of Rome and to declare their independence from Rome. This is the reason behind the political reformation that took place.” (WN: CWWN: (Set 3, Vol. 50).

Thank the Lord for luminaries like John Wycliffe. Today the Lord continues to need more Wycliffes who will love Him and be constituted with His Word, and who will rise up to speak forth all that the Lord has revealed to them. May we be such shining ones in this dark age, holding forth the word of life!

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.
- Reetzke, James. *Biographical Sketches*. Chicago: Chicago Bibles and Books, 2003.