

INTRODUCTION

William Tyndale was born in Gloucestershire, England, around the year 1484, and educated at Oxford and Cambridge. His skill with languages soon became apparent as he developed into a talented linguist, fluent in Greek, Hebrew, Latin, French, German, Italian, and Spanish.

In the early 1520s, he was ordained as a priest and took on a position of a tutor to the children of Sir John Walsh. One day in the Walsh home he heard a clergyman state, "It is better to be without God's laws than the Pope's," to which he quickly responded, **"I defy the Pope, and all his laws. If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause the boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou dost."**

Tyndale's efforts to translate the Bible into English began shortly thereafter. Due to opposition in London, Tyndale accepted the help of a London merchant and relocated to Germany in 1524 to undertake his translation there. But continental Europe was not altogether safe for him either. Because of constant threats against his life and regular betrayals from friends and colleagues, Tyndale was never able to return to England. Instead, he lived a life on the run and in poverty.

Nonetheless, Tyndale was able to make progress on his life's ambition. In 1525, he finished his first edition of the New Testament in English. Copies from Germany arrived in England in 1526, with many being seized and burned by the English authorities. Yet other copies still made it into the hands of the public, even though possession of such a book meant certain punishment. A few years later, in January of 1530, Tyndale finished his translation of the Pentateuch and had copies smuggled from Antwerp, Belgium, to England. A precursor to what would develop into today's *Study Bible* format, Tyndale's Old Testament translation contained "introductions" and marginal notes that helped readers understand the text and its context.

Efforts to capture Tyndale, brand him as a heretic, and destroy his works only invigorated him. He continued his translation work in the early 1530s, continuing his translation of other Old Testament books while publishing revised translations of his previous works, particularly of the New Testament.

But in 1535, Tyndale was betrayed and captured in Antwerp. Despite efforts from some officials to have him released, he remained imprisoned and was interrogated for sixteen months. Finally, **on the morning of October 6, 1536, Tyndale was led in a procession to a place of execution and was strangled and burned.**

What motivated Tyndale to sacrifice his life was his conviction that the word of God was *necessary* for the people. Tyndale stated, "God requireth obedience unto his word and abhorreth all good intents and good zeals which are without God's word. For they are nothing else than plain idolatry and worshipping of false gods" (*Obedience of a Christian Man*, 179). Elsewhere he stated, "We do not wish to abolish teaching and to make every man his own master, but if the curates will not teach the gospel, the layman must have the Scripture, and read it for himself, taking God for his teacher." And, "Christ desires his mysteries to be published abroad as widely as possible. I would that [the Gospels and letters of Paul] were translated into all languages, of all Christian people, and that they might be read and known."

Tyndale's last words before he died were a prayer: **"Lord, open the king of England's eyes."** The Lord granted that prayer. Two years later, the King of England authorized the publication of "The Great Bible"—a translation of the Bible in English based largely on Tyndale's work. Eventually, the most popular English Bible of all time was produced in 1611—the King James Version Bible. Although published 75 years after Tyndale's death, the language of the KJV is largely Tyndale's. In

fact, it is estimated that 83% of the NT is taken from Tyndale’s translation. As many historians have noted, no single Englishman has had such an impact on the English-speaking church throughout the world as William Tyndale. David Daniell states, “Tyndale has reached more people than Shakespeare” (“Introduction,” William Tyndale, *Obedience of a Christian Man*, xix). True to his ambition, God has used Tyndale to enable plough-boys throughout the world to know more about God and His word than the popes of the Roman Catholic Church.

What made Tyndale such a man? In a word, **Tyndale believed in the *absolute necessity of Scripture*.**

THE NATURE OF NECESSITY

What does it mean to assert that Scripture is “necessary”? John Frame provides a simple and straightforward answer: **“To say that Scripture is necessary is simply to say that we need it”** (*Doctrine of the Word of God*, 211). Simply stated, the word “necessary” refers to something that is **“absolutely needed”** (Miriam-Webster) or **“needed in order to achieve a particular result”** (Cambridge). Synonyms for the word “necessary” include words like “obligatory,” “required,” “mandatory,” and “essential.” Thus, when used to describe the Bible, the term refers to the *essential nature of Scripture, its required role in achieving a particular result.*

It must be noted, however, that this *necessity* is not to be understood as applied toward God. Scripture is *not* necessary because God was obliged or restrained in some fashion. As J. I. Packer rightly states, “God owes sinners nothing” (J. I. Packer, *Honouring the Written Word of God*, 99). Rather, Scripture is necessary because of two fundamental factors related to creation: **(a) human depravity; and (b) the limitation of general revelation.**

Factors Contributing to Necessity

A. The Problem of Human Depravity

Man has a sin problem. God made man for fellowship with Him, “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever,” but because of Adam’s sin (Genesis 3), all have become hostile and deadened to God.

→ Romans 1:18–23; 3:10–12, 23; 5:12

This sin problem is known as *total or comprehensive depravity*. As John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue explain, “Total depravity emphasizes the devastating impact of sin on the person and covers three related concepts: (1) the pollution and corruption of all aspects of a person; (2) the complete inability of a person to please God; and (3) universality, in that all are conceived and born as sinners” (*Biblical Doctrine*, 467). Mankind’s depravity creates a necessity—a need for an effective means to solve this universal, all-encompassing sin problem.

B. The Limitation of General Revelation

As was explained in the first lesson of this series, “general” or “natural revelation” refers to the knowledge God communicated through the natural order—that is, through creation itself, the course of history, and the human conscience. This knowledge is evident to all people, it is evident at all times, and it is evident in all places.

→ Psalm 19:1–6; Acts 14:15–17; Acts 17:22–29; Romans 1:16–32; Romans 2:11–16.

A survey of the key texts of Scripture that describe general revelation leads to the conclusion that general revelation communicates knowledge about: (a) certain aspects of the character of God; (b) the reality of sin and the necessity of righteousness; (c) the inexcusability of rebellion against God; and (d) that man must seek God for a remedy to his sin problem.

But here’s the catch: **general revelation is *limited* because of its nature and purpose.** God never intended this form of revelation to contain in itself the solution to man’s universal sin problem. General revelation is limited in: (a) its *breadth*—there are many things that God does not reveal in general revelation that are necessary to know Him personally; (b) its *depth*—there are many things that God reveals only generally in creation which require more detail for fellowship; (c) its *delivery*—general revelation is sensed and observed but is not communicated in language; thus, it not only requires interpretation but the added effort of articulation in word; and (d) its *purpose*—

general revelation reveals God's goodness and exposes man's depravity, but it does not explain to sinners the way of salvation.

As the *Westminster Confession of Faith* states, "Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation . . ." (1.1). Indeed, general revelation's limitation creates a necessity—a need for a different form of revelation that will contain the solution to man's sin problem.

To meet this need, God has given *special revelation*—the kind of revelation that contains the knowledge necessary for solving man's sin problem—and He has done so in the form of "**sacred writings**" or "**the Scriptures**." John Calvin—in a section in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* entitled "The Need of Scripture, As a Guide and Teacher, In Coming to God as a Creator"—concisely explains how Scripture meets this fundamental need:

Though the effulgence which is presented to every eye, both in the heavens and on the earth, leaves the ingratitude of man without excuse, since God, in order to bring the whole human race under the same condemnation, holds forth to all, without exception, a mirror of his Deity in his works, another and better help must be given to guide us properly to God as a Creator. Not in vain, therefore, has he added the light of his Word in order that he might make himself known unto salvation, and bestowed the privilege on those whom he was pleased to bring into nearer and more familiar relation to himself. (I.6.1)

THE TESTIMONY TO NECESSITY

The biblical evidence for the necessity of Scripture can be summarized into at least *six categories*:

A. Scripture is necessary because *regeneration* is necessary.

Scripture, applied by the Holy Spirit, is God's chosen instrument through which He brings life to the spiritually dead. Thus, because regeneration is necessary, so must be its instrument.

→ James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23

B. Scripture is necessary because *faith* is necessary.

Faith, the means by which God justifies the sinner, is only possible in response to Scripture.

→ Romans 10:13–14, 17; 2 Timothy 3:15

C. Scripture is necessary because *sanctification* is necessary.

Spiritual growth is not the *cause* of salvation, but it is its necessary *effect*. Since God's word is sanctification's essential ingredient, that word must also be necessary.

→ Matthew 4:4 (citing Deuteronomy 8:3); John 17:17; Colossians 3:16; 1 Peter 2:2

D. Scripture is necessary because *proclamation* is necessary.

Christ not only saves sinners through the proclamation of His word, but He also edifies those whom He saves through the proclamation of His word.

→ Romans 10:13–15, 17; 1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Timothy 4:1–2

E. Scripture is necessary because *correction* is necessary.

In the Christian's fallible state, inscripturated revelation is constantly needed to prevent the drift into error and to eradicate existing errors.

→ 2 Timothy 3:16; Titus 1:9; Hebrews 4:12

To this point, the Dutch theologian Antonius Walaeus (1573–1639), stated, "If Holy Scripture is neglected, then nothing in the Christian religion can be established with certainty, for from outside of it no criterion or guidance could be given to distinguish the divine truth from false

influences and erroneous forces” (*Synopsis of a Purer Theology*, 2.9). Or as William Barrick has stated, “In other words, there is an innate antagonism in the sinful nature to divine truth about mankind’s lost condition and the divine remedy for sin. In the light of human failings and the antipathy of sinners, Scripture is the most certain safeguard against the corruption of special revelation” (“The Necessity of Scripture,” 159).

F. Scripture is necessary because *propagation* is necessary.

God’s word is not only a word for a specific situation; though fixed, it is also a word to be broadcast to all generations of all of mankind.

→ Deuteronomy 29:29; Matthew 28:19–20

God’s revelation in *written form* is the most effective means not only *to reveal* definite knowledge about God, but also *to preserve*, *to distribute*, and *to establish* this knowledge to the ends of the earth. As a written text, God’s word is *durable* and *fixed*; it can be *translated* and *published*; it can be *checked* and *validated*. As Joel Beeke and Paul Smalley have observed, “Written documents have far greater stability over time, uniformity in content when copied, and universality of public access than oral traditions” (*Reformed Systematic Theology*, 1.356).

THE
IMPLICATIONS
OF NECESSITY

The necessity of Scripture has definite implications for every man’s life.

- A. Acknowledge your need for these Scriptures!** The Bible cannot exist merely as family heirloom or religious artifact. We must recognize it for what it really is—*our very life*.
- B. Thank God for His provision of these Scriptures!** As Packer stated, “God owes sinners nothing.” Yet despite our unworthiness, He condescended to us and provided us with His word—something “more desirable than gold” and “sweeter also than honey” (Psalm 19:10).
- C. Take up and read these Scriptures!** Do not fail to take full advantage of what is in your hands. Men like William Tyndale gave their lives to ensure you had access to the very words of God.
- D. Lead your family to these Scriptures!** Show your wife and children, or any who may observe your life up close or from afar, that you really do believe in the necessity of the word of God.
- E. Proclaim these Scriptures!** Affirmation of the necessity of Scripture leads to one definite conclusion: dying souls need to hear the word of God. There is no hope without it. Embrace your role as a God-appointed ambassador and “persuade men” (2 Corinthians 5:11).

DISCUSSION
QUESTIONS

Discuss these questions in your small group:

1. In your own words, explain what “the necessity of Scripture” means.
2. Why is Scripture “necessary”? Summarize the two fundamental reasons, and provide several biblical texts in support of each one.
3. Why is general revelation *unable* to lead sinners to salvation? What implications does this have for those who have never heard the gospel?
4. Explain the connection between *belief in* the necessity of Scripture and one’s *practice of* Bible reading. How does your current practice of Bible reading reflect your belief in (or ambivalence to!) the necessity of Scripture? What needs to change or improve in your appropriation of Scripture?
5. How does the doctrine of Scripture’s necessity motivate and embolden evangelism?

FURTHER
STUDY

For further study this week:

1. Memorize Matthew 4:4 and Romans 10:13–15.
2. Listen to or watch the sermon by Burk Parsons, entitled “The Necessity of Scripture” (Ligonier Ministries), available here: [Burk Parsons: The Necessity of Scripture](#).
3. Read Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word*, chapter 6, “God’s Word Is Necessary,” pp. 85–93.
4. Read William Barrick, “The Necessity of Scripture,” in the Fall 2004 edition of *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, available at this link: [tmsj15f.pdf](#).

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: www.gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: November 20, “The Bible Is Authoritative”