

A N N O D O M I N I 1 0 0 - P R E S E N T

# 5 MINUTES *in* CHURCH HISTORY



An Introduction to the Stories of God's Faithfulness  
in the History of the Church

STEPHEN J. NICHOLS

“One of the great dangers the church faces is moving into the future without being firmly anchored in the past. It is essential that as we look forward we also look back, and for this reason I’m especially thankful for Stephen Nichols. He has deep knowledge, a skilled pen, and a contagious enthusiasm. I highly recommend his book and the podcast from which it originated.”

—TIM CHALLIES  
Blogger  
Challies.com

“The history of the church needs to be taught in various ways, and the form of this book—pithy stories and their lessons, what Stephen Nichols calls ‘postcards’—is ideal for many who find themselves too busy to read larger chunks of text. Dr. Nichols is a master of this method, having honed his skill in composing these pieces for his podcast. Ideal for all who love church history—busy and not so busy.”

—DR. MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN  
Professor of church history and biblical spirituality  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky.



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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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## PREFACE

This book offers a series of postcards from church history. There are postcards of people, places, events, artifacts, dates, and ideas. I offer these postcards in the hopes that you will enjoy visiting the past—and that you will go back there often.

These chapters were originally episodes on the podcast *5 Minutes in Church History*. The first episode aired on August 14, 2013. The three hundredth episode was released on September 26, 2018, as the podcast reached the five-year mark. This podcast is made possible by Ligonier Ministries, and many staff at Ligonier have contributed to the effort. These include Nathan W. Bingham, John Cobb, David Finnamore, Kevin D. Gardner, Caleb Gorton, Tyler Kenney, Kent Madison, Dirk Naves, Anthony Salangsang, and Dave Theriault. The whole thing started as a conversation with Chris Larson sometime in March 2013. I am grateful to all these and more at Ligonier. I am also grateful to the listeners. Thank you for spending five minutes with me each week. Finally, I am grateful to Megan Taylor for her efforts in helping me turn these episodes into chapters and into a book.





## IS SPURGEON RIGHT?

The bombing of Britain during World War II leveled most of the area known as “Elephant & Castle” in the city of London. A row of pillars stood defiantly among the piles of rubble. These pillars belonged to the Metropolitan Tabernacle, the church that housed the larger-than-life preacher of the nineteenth century, Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Those pillars well represent Spurgeon. He was solid. He stood tall in his own day, and like the pillars, his legacy still stands.

Spurgeon has friends across many pews. Baptists like Spurgeon because he was a Baptist. Presbyterians like Spurgeon because he was so Reformed. Even Lutherans like Spurgeon because he was very nearly a nineteenth-century version of Martin Luther.

While Spurgeon held forth at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Londoners would flock to hear him preach. In fact, people even traveled the Atlantic to hear him preach. He wrote many sermons, of course, while he was at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. And Spurgeon also wrote many books.

In one of his many books, Spurgeon made a comment well worth hearing. It comes from the preface to his book on commentaries. He had written this book to convince pastors of the need to use commentaries and to engage in deep study for their sermon preparation. Spurgeon well knew the value of reading for preaching. He had a personal library of around twenty-five thousand books. And this was in the 1800s. What's more, he actually read most of them.

In the preface to this book, he speaks to an objection to using commentaries. The objection goes something like this: As a Christian, I have the Holy Spirit. I have the Spirit's wonderful work of illumination. I don't need commentaries; I don't need to rely on the thoughts of others. I can go right to the source.

To that objection, Spurgeon replied, "It seems odd, that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to themselves, should think so little of what he has revealed to others."<sup>1</sup>

Spurgeon reminds us that the Holy Spirit is not an individual gift. The Holy Spirit is a corporate gift to the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit has taught others, and the Spirit uses others to teach us. Spurgeon's argument reaches the conclusion that preachers should use commentaries. Don't be arrogant, and don't think you have a corner on the market of the Holy Spirit, because you don't.

But what if we were to expand Spurgeon's argument in order to apply it to the relationship of today's church to church history? Here's my paraphrase of Spurgeon's argument: "I find it odd that the church of the 21st century thinks so highly of what the Holy Spirit has taught it today that it thinks so little

of what the Holy Spirit taught the church in the first century, the second, the third, the fourth, and so on, and so on.”

The Holy Spirit is not unique to our age. The Holy Spirit has been at work in the church for the past twenty centuries. We could put the matter this way—it is rather prideful to think that we have nothing to learn from the past. And remember, pride is a sin. And also remember, as Scripture says, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18). We need a little humility. Enough humility to say we may not have all the answers in the present. Enough humility to say we need the past, and enough humility to visit it from time to time.

As Deuteronomy 6:10–11 vividly portrays for us, we drink at wells we did not dig, we eat from vineyards we did not plant, and we live in cities we did not build. We need that dose of humility that reminds us how dependent we are on the past and how thankful we need to be for those who have gone before us and dug the wells, planted the vineyards, and built the cities.

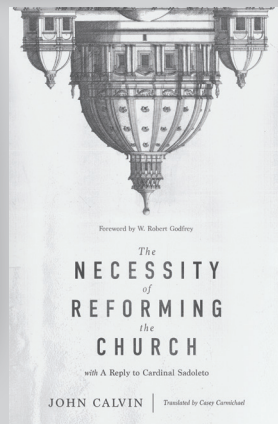
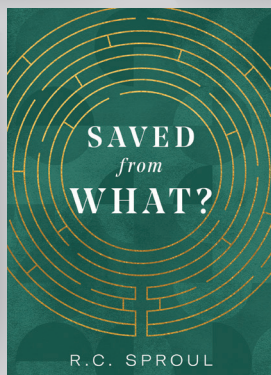
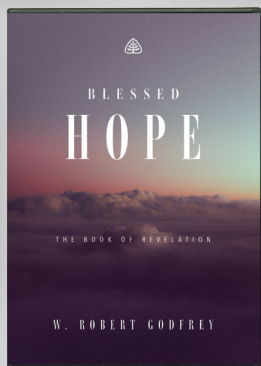
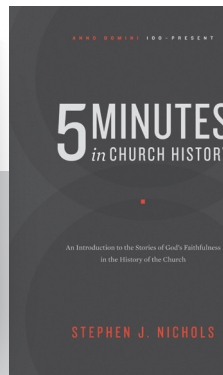
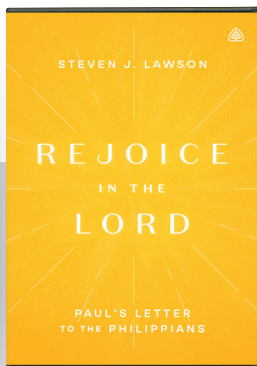
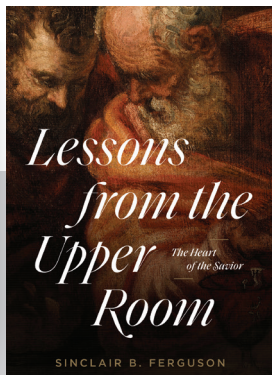
The past enriches our lives in surprising ways. In our past, our family history, we see examples of faithful disciples. We can be encouraged and even inspired by their faithfulness. But, far more, we see examples of God’s faithfulness to His people. How does Paul put it in 2 Corinthians 1:10? He declares: “He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.”

The centuries of church history give us a litany of God’s deliverances. God has done it before, many times and in many ways, and He can do it again. He will do it again. And in that, we find courage for today and for tomorrow.

## 5 MINUTES IN CHURCH HISTORY

In church history, we see men and women facing challenges not unlike the challenges before us today. We look back and we learn. We also learn from the mistakes and missteps of the past. And, though it is a cliché, learning can be fun. Family stories of the exploits of crazy uncles inform; they also entertain. It is the same with our history, our family story. Let's get started.

We want to see men and women around the world connect the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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